

Thailand: A changing Mekong, changing lives in Ubon Ratchathani

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Dams constructed by Chinese government along the Mekong river are forcing villagers in Ubon Ratchathani into lives of uncertainty, even as they reap no benefits from the dams themselves.

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On 19 April 2017, seven exploration ships from China arrived in Chiang Khong District, Chiang Rai Province. The ships were assigned to navigate Thailand's Mekong river as part of a plan to bomb outcrops along the riverbank to clear the way for commercial ships.

The bombing is the first stage of a plan to develop a shipping route from China's Yunnan Province to Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos. On 27 December 2016, the Thai cabinet gave the green light to the Development Plan for International Navigation on the Lancang-Mekong River (2015-2025), approving boats from China to survey the river.

This is not the first time that governments have tried to appropriate the Mekong without the participation of local people, who are often heavily affected by such megaprojects. Security officers have also intimidated those who stand against them.

On 26 April, soldiers from the 37 Military Circle of Chiang Rai summoned Niwat Roikaew to 'a talk' at a coffee shop [see article below]. Niwat is the leader of a local environmental conservation group called 'Khon Rak Chiang Kong' that actively stands against the Chinese navigation. Though authorities did not press charge that day, they asked him to stop his campaign but Niwat insisted on continuing his opposition.

Before being summoned, Niwat told the media that the bombing of outcrops would significantly damage the Mekong River's ecology. Outcrops provide natural shelter for animals and plants, while acting as natural dams that help slow the river stream and prevent the destruction of local agricultural areas.

"[The Mekong] will become a mere canal. Without outcrops, she is no longer a river but a waterway. There will be no place for animals to live," said Niwat as quoted by *The Isaan Record*.



Niwat Roikaew, the head of Khon Rak Chiang Kong group (Photo from The Isaan Record)

Conflict between local people and governments on the Mekong river emerged in 1996 when China built the first dam on the Mekong river. Nowadays, six dams have been built in China, and another in Laos. Those dams have dramatically affected the tide of the Mekong, contributing to a decline in fish numbers, size and diversity. Unpredictable tides also prevent people from planting along the riverbank, once a main source of income and food.

Ubon Ratchathani provides a startling example of how the dams have affected local livelihoods. Ubon is the last province along the Mekong in Thailand before the river enters Lao. The river has to pass the seven dams in China and Laos before it arriving in Ubon. The province also profits from tourist spots along the Mekong's bank such as Sam Phan Bok (Three Thousand Holes), Hat Salueng (Salueng Beach) and the two-tone rivers.

The voices of Ubon people echo the some 3.1 million Thais who live along the Mekong.

Niphaphon Ura, a villager whose house is located next to the Mekong, has witnessed the change and fluctuation of the river since the very first dam was constructed. In the past, the water level will drop between December and April, allowing villagers to grow crops like rice, corns and beans in the sand bars that were revealed.

But ever since the dams were constructed, the river's tide has become unnatural and unpredictable. Sometimes the water will recede for two days, other times for almost two months. The villagers can no longer plan their farming.

Niphaphon has also observed that the amount and size of fish caught in the Mekong has significantly decreased. She used to catch redbtail catfish weighing between one to three kilos, sometimes up to five kilos. Nowadays, fish weigh less than a kilo

Niphaphon explained that fish usually lay eggs during the drought season, where the river is placid. But China has begun releasing water during the same period, preventing the fish from reproducing. She is concerned that if China bomb more outcrops, the tide will be stronger and harm fish even further.

Niphaphon argues it is harder to protect the community and natural resources under the political climate of Thailand's military regime.

"In the past, we could talk and speak out. We once brought a deputy minister to visit our village because they were elected so had to listen to us. Since the coup, we have had to travel to Bangkok. [In 2015] over a hundred villagers went to Bangkok together with the People's Movement For Justice Society but [the junta] allowed only ten of us to go inside the meeting room [see article below]. The government said it is aware of our problems and will fix them. But they've done nothing," Niphaphon stated.

The economic hardship caused by the dams is now forcing villagers to leave their hometowns to

work in Bangkok. Praiswan Kaewsai, a villager age 46, said that two out of her four children had to start working when they finished grade nine. Her two elder sons went to work in Bangkok when they turned 20. Some months they send back 4,000 baht in remittances, some months they send nothing.

Praiswan's sons also sent two children back home and asked her to take care of them. She added that when her third son, currently a grade 7 student, may also go to Bangkok to join his brothers when he finishes grade 9.

Apart from remittances, Praiswan's husband earns 5,000 baht per month from his work as the village head's assistant. Praiswan also makes kratip, a bamboo container for keeping cooked sticky rice, and earns about two or three thousand baht per month. But the income is spent completely on their children and basic utilities.

Praiswan frets that villagers' income from fishing has disappeared since the dams were constructed. In the past, villagers could reap over ten kilos of fish and earn seven to eight hundred baht each time they sailed. Presently, they only get a couple of kilos per round and sometimes have to set sail four or five times to reel in just one fish. Most villagers decided to stop fishing and have to buy fish from the market instead.

"Don't ask about my income. I have no income because I have no job. My only job now is taking care of my children. If my children don't send back money, I can't eat," said Praiswan.

The tourist industry is also in trouble. Most tourist attractions in Ubon Ratchathani also rely on the Mekong's tide.

Hat Salueng, or Salueng Beach, is a sandbar that appears between December and May during the drought season. Tourists who want to visit Sam Phan Bok, also known as the Grand Canyon of Siam, have to take a boat from Salueng Beach. The beach is the foundation of many locals' main sources of income.

Prasat Udomlap, a sailor aged 60, observes that the dams now cause the beach to appear for only a few weeks in late December. His income has dropped from 20 or 30 thousand baht per month to less than ten thousand.

In the past, the beach housed 19 service boats for tourists. Each boat sailed two or three rounds a day and the sailor earn 1,000 baht per round. Now there are only 17 boats that sail only one round a day.

Prasat fears that if there is more bombing of the Mekong outcrops, the water level will be even higher — making his income will be even lower.

"It's like China is bullying Thailand's tourism industry. Now there's flooding during the drought season, which is supposed to be high season. In the past, there were so many tourists and vendors, just like Pattaya. There was a beach volleyball and football competition. Now they're all gone. When tourists come here and find that there's no beach, they return home right away," Prasat explained.

Prasat added that Hat Hong, called the 'Desert of Thailand' for its beautiful dunes, has also been affected by the dams on the Mekong. In the past, this area was flooded for over three months during the rainy season. The lengthy flood period prevented plants from taking root in the area, creating the sand dunes that appeared during the drought season.

After the dams were build, the flood period was shortened to just a month, not long enough to limit plant growth. Hat Hong this year was covered in tall grass, tarnishing its image as the "Desert of

Siam”.

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* Prachatai English. 12/05/2017 - 15:02:

<http://prachatai.org/english/node/7138?utm>

Military summons environmentalist opposing China's Mekong navigation

The military has summoned the leader of an environmental group opposing China's exploration of the Mekong River for the purposes of developing a commercial shipping route.

On 25 April 2017, Col Jarat Panyadi, Deputy Commander of the 37 Military Circle of Chiang Rai, summoned Niwat Roikaew, the leader of an a local environmental conservation group called 'Khon Rak Chiang Kong', for a “chat” at a coffee shop.

The military summoned him to discuss the group's stance against the navigation of the Mekong River by Chinese ships, the first stage of a plan to develop a shipping route from the Yunnan Province of China to Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos.

During the talk which lasted some 30 minutes, the military officer told Niwat that his environmental group should not campaign against the ships 'violently', before asking about the group's plans.

Niwat told the officer that the group will continue to oppose the navigation plans peacefully.

But the activist maintained that the bombing of outcrops along the Mekong to clear the way for commercial ships will cause irreversible environmental damages to the river and local communities.

Niwat pointed out that local people were not given opportunities to participate in the government's decision making. No thorough Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) had been performed before Thai authorities give a nod to the navigation plan.

The Thai cabinet on 27 December 2016 gave the green light to the Development Plan for International Navigation on the Lancang-Mekong River (2015-2025), approving boats from China to survey the river.

The first stage of the plan from 2015-2020 involves surveys and assessments of the social and environmental impacts of the project, which have to be approved by the governments of all four countries. During the second stage from 2020-2025, infrastructure such as ports and bridges will be constructed along the river.

Prachatai

* Prachatai English. 26/04/2017 - 15:57:

<https://prachatai.com/english/node/7100>

Civil society groups on long march for land rights

Thailand's marginalised communities countrywide staged rallies to call for land rights amid tight monitoring from the authorities.

People's Movement for Just Society (P-Move) and Northern Development Foundation (NDF), civil society groups promoting land rights for Thailand's landless communities, staged a rally on Tuesday morning, 22 December 2015, at the Three Kings Monument Square in the northern province of Chiang Mai.

Similar rallies initiated called 'First Step for Thailand's Land Reform' were held in 18 other provinces countrywide to urge the authorities to halt the implementation of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) Order No. 64/2104 issued to reclaim protected forests and to come up with concrete policies to grant community land rights to the poor.

In Chiang Mai, about 100 people participated in the rally on Tuesday morning. The group will march to Lamphun Province to observe the Supreme Court's verdict on Wednesday on a land dispute between Lamphun residents and investors before continuing on a long march to Bangkok.

According to P-Move, it has been well over 405 days since a committee comprising government officials and civil society groups was formed to solve the protracted land rights issue, but nothing concrete has been done.

On the contrary, it seems as if the current military government has abandoned its intentions to solve the problem, added P-Move on its Facebook page [1].

P-Move concluded that about 400 marginalised communities countrywide are now at risk of eviction as the military government's forest protection policy is still in place.

Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR) reported that in Chiang Mai, police officers at about 10:30 am informed the rally participants as they were passing the Kawila Military Base that they might be charged with a violation of the Public Assembly Law and took pictures of rally participants.

Ten military officers tightly monitored the event as it started at the Three Kings Monument in Chiang Mai, TLHR reported.

Prachatai

* Prachatai English. Tue, 22/12/2015 - 15:39:
<https://prachatai.com/english/node/5723>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/Pmove2011/photos/a.819965034722733.1073741828.819942928058277/1069236213128946/?type=3&theater>