

Laos dam collapse: work continues on huge projects despite promised halt

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Consultation for the Pak Lay dam in Xayaburi province has begun, despite PM calling off all work after disaster

Work on two of the biggest dams on the Mekong River in [Laos](#) is still going ahead, despite a promise by the government to halt and review all new projects after a deadly dam disaster in July.

The fatal collapse of the Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy hydroelectric dam saw 5bn cubic litres of water flood the Attapeu region, washing away entire villages, displacing more than 6,000 people and killing at least 35 people. Hundreds are still missing.

In response, Laos prime minister Thongloun Sisoulith ordered a “national review” of all new hydropower projects, declaring all future dam projects suspended.

However, the day after the review was announced, Laos initiated a six-month regional consultation process for the Pak Lay dam in Xayaburi province, due to be the fourth-biggest hydropower project on the Mekong. It is a significant step forward in the development and eventual construction of the new mega-dam.



Laos dam collapse: 3,000 in need of rescue as death toll rises to 26

The move has called into question how serious the government is about reviewing numerous multibillion-dollar hydropower projects, which are a pivotal part of the poverty-stricken country’s lucrative plans to become the “battery of Asia” and sell power to neighbouring nations such as Thailand. There are 140 proposed dams in Laos, which have already brought billions of dollars of foreign investment into the country from places such as China and South Korea.

Maureen Harris, the south-east Asia programme director of environmental organisation International Rivers, said the decision to press on with the Pak Lay dam process “does raise questions around the good faith and the seriousness with which the Laos government is implementing its announced suspension of new dams.”

She added: “A suspension should really mean a suspension, and shouldn’t be taken in parallel to pushing forward a new and highly contentious project on the Mekong mainstream.”

The Mekong River Commission (MRC), an intergovernmental body that regulates developments on the river, had also reportedly asked for the Pak Lay dam to be paused and said it was still seeking confirmation “whether the Pak Lay hydropower project is considered a new investment by the Laos government”.



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An aerial view of houses submerged by floodwaters after the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy dam collapsed in Attapeu province. Photograph: Abc Laos News Handout/EPA

The MRC also confirmed that the \$2.4bn, 912-megawatt Pak Beng dam, which will be the third-biggest hydropower project on the Mekong mainstream once built, has also not been suspended or put under review. The project has already undergone its six-month consultation process and is now waiting for approval on a joint action plan, which lays out how the four countries on the Mekong – Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam – will be involved and affected by the building of the dam.

Both dams, which have backing from Chinese developers, are already highly controversial among local communities and environmental activists. The Pak Lay dam is due to eventually displace 1,000 families while the Pak Beng hydropower project will force the relocation of about 6,700 people.

The lack of clarity extends to the impact of the devastating dam collapse in July.

The Laos government, which operates under a strict Communist regime and is notoriously secretive, has imposed a ban on international organisations that are providing relief, such as the Red Cross and Save The Children, from speaking to the media. They also ordered all 150 local rescue teams from Laos and Thailand to leave the area.

Some of the Laos and Thai rescuers who were first on the ground have called into question said the official government figures for the number still missing, which is currently 131 people. “They say there are just over 100 people missing but that is not the truth,” one member of the Laos rescue team on the frontline of the search, who asked to remain anonymous, told the Guardian. “The government are giving figures about dead bodies we collected that are well below what we collected ourselves.”



Rescue workers in Laos take away a victim of the disaster. Photograph: Supplied

Pisit Pongsirisupakul, who was working for the Thai rescue team Hook 31, said that “after the third day, there wasn’t much hope of finding anyone left alive”.

He added: “And if we estimate 7,000 people were in the dam area, there are still a lot to search for since there were only about 5,000 people staying at the rescue centres.”

The Laos government did not respond to a request for comment.

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