



16 August 2008

Statement

Mekong flood, MRC's roles, dams in China, and a failed alarm system

The severe flood occurring to the Mekong River during the past week has been causing much suffering to people living along the River, all the way from the Chiang Saen and the Chiang Khong district in the Chiang Rai province, Thailand, down to the Vientiane municipality, Lao PDR, as well as to the Nongkhai and the Nakhonpanom province, Thailand. We, the Thai People's Network for Mekong, who have been closely monitoring the current critical situations in Mekong, would like to pose the following questions and requests to the Mekong River Commission (MRC), as a mechanism to help manage the Mekong River:

Contradicting roles played by MRC

Yesterday (15 August 2005), MRC released a statement regarding the massive flood currently occurring in Mekong and said in the statement that the "northern parts" of the Mekong basin had experienced above-average rainfalls, intensified and prolonged by a tropical storm "Kammuri" and that this had led to massively increased water runoffs in the northern river basin. MRC also pointed out that "in the case of the flood water that reached Vientiane, some 50% originated in China". MRC then made contradicting remarks in the end, saying, "The current water levels are entirely the result of the meteorological and hydrological conditions and were not caused by water released from presently operating Chinese dams which have storage volumes far too small to affect the flood hydrology of the Mekong".

MRC has not disclosed complete information, as its statement referred only to the flood that had reached Vientiane, some 50% of which had originated from China, according to the Commission. MRC has avoided providing information on the severe flood happening to Chiang Saen and its link to the water flown from China, conceivably attributable to natural rainfalls as well as the water released from the 3 dams.

The total storage capacity of 3 Mekong mainstream dams in China is 3,043 million cubic meters. The Manwan dam has the storage capacity of 920 million cubic meters. The other two upstream dams in China, the Dachaoshan dam and the Jinghong dam, have the storage capacity of 890 million cubic meters and 1,233 million cubic meters, respectively.

Apart from having only given such incomplete information, MRC stated that there is an alarm system between a water level measuring station in Chiang Saen in Thailand and a station in Jinghong, where a dam closest to Thailand is located. MRC claimed that all the 18 stations along the Mekong River work together and exchange information with each other. "The time it takes the water to travel from these stations is as follows. Jinghong to Chiang Saen 21 hours; Chiang Saen to Luang Prabang 17 hours; and Luang Prabang to Vientiane/Nong Khai 24 hours. This enables short term flood forecasting which in turn allows the MRC to issue advance notice of extreme water levels to concerned agencies," MRC described.

Spotting contradiction in MRC's statement, we, Thai People's Network for Mekong, stress that we disagree with MRC's roles in finding excuses to protect China's dams. Instead, we insist that MRC should examine the most updated information from China and should immediately alert the countries and communities located in the lower Mekong on potential severe floods. MRC must have been monitoring Mekong and have had all the information available on the water levels from all the stations along the River. MRC must have realized very well that the water from China would flood lower parts of Mekong. That MRC has never alerted people

living in its member countries about the current flood through all the channels available to the Commission to prevent disasters is not acceptable. The only channel through which MRC has provided information to the public is its website. When the situations became serious, MRC released a statement only to protect China and itself.

The fallacy on dams and alarm systems in China

Since the beginning of its plan to build a series of Mekong mainstream dams until the completion of the first dam, Manwan, in 1996, China claimed that Chinese dams upstream would help provide more water to the Mekong River in the dry season, as well as prevent the flood during the rainy season. However, with the presently occurring flood, it has become clear that the water is coming mostly from the Mekong mainstream, not from tributaries in Thailand or Laos. This observation is in line with a news report in "Shanghai Daily" on 13 August, which wrote that Yunnan was experiencing a monsoon and that the monsoon caused the death of 40 people and affected more than 1,250,000 people living in 11 towns. As a matter of fact, since the Manwan dam was completed, the water level in the Mekong mainstream has never decreased during the wet season. Instead, the water keeps increasing, when compared with that prior to the dam construction.

We believe that the water in China has significant impact on the water flow and the hydrology of the lower Mekong, especially in the Chiang Rai province, Thailand. Nevertheless, cooperation and a flood alarm system among MRC, China, and the lower Mekong countries have completely failed to protect people living along the Mekong River.

We request that MRC should disclose all the relevant information on the current situations in China. MRC must disclose information on how much water from China has affected the lower Mekong, as well as in which parts. We request that MRC should disclose information on the water levels measured at the Manwan, Dachaoshan, and Jinghong dam sites. We believe that only transparent processes can prevent disastrous floods in the lower Mekong. If it is indeed the case that China has installed an effective alarm system and/or established good working relationships with MRC, MRC should prove this to the public in the lower Mekong countries.

We believe that MRC's statement has shown that MRC is trying to avoid pointing out a very key issue, that is, Chinese dams' roles in the severe flood currently occurring to the lower Mekong countries. MRC's assertion that Chinese dams have storage volumes far too small to affect the Mekong hydrology is shameful, as it misses an issue central to the present disaster and suffering faced by people living in the lower Mekong countries, whom MRC is supposed to serve.

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