

Press Release by Salween Community Groups

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Salween communities urge Thailand to halt plans to build dams in Burma's war zones

Ethnic community groups today urged the Thai government at a public forum in Bangkok to halt plans to build dams on the Salween river in Burma, where militarization, conflict and human rights abuses are continuing despite current ceasefires.

Thai news agencies reported last week that Thai Energy Minister Pongsak Raktapongpaisal had urged his Burmese counterpart to speed up the "Mai Tong" dam project in southern Shan State, to import 7,000 MW of electricity to Thailand. Out of six Salween dams approved this year by the Burmese government, the Mai Tong and the Hatgyi dam in Karen State will export power to Thailand. Other dams are planned to export power to China, despite the continuing lack of electricity throughout Burma.

Mai Tong is the latest name of the Tasang dam project, which at 228 meters will be the tallest in Southeast Asia and flood about 900 sq kms of land, submerging the homes and farmlands of well over 12,000 people, most of whom have already fled to Thailand to escape Burmese anti-insurgency operations. Since 1996 the Burmese military has forcibly relocated over 300,000 villagers from this and surrounding rural areas of southern Shan State to cut off support for Shan troops and secure control of the rich local natural resources, including hydropower. Large scale logging and gold mining is currently being carried out along the Salween river banks.

The number of Burmese battalions in townships adjoining the Tasang dam area has more than tripled from 10 to 36 since 1996, and armed clashes have continued this year with the Shan State Army-South near the dam site, despite a ceasefire signed in December 2011. Villagers in the area continue to flee to Thailand to escape forced labour and extortion by the Burmese military.

Similarly in Karen State, despite ceasefires with the Karen National Union and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), there was fighting in April this year when government border guard forces tried to clear the DKBA from the Hatgyi dam site. Many of the villagers along this part of the Salween continue to shelter in refugee camps in Thailand.

All six Salween dams are proceeding in violation of international dam building standards, which should ensure transparency and respect for rights of affected communities. The dam sites are strictly guarded, and local people have been given no information about the projects. Downstream communities remain ignorant about impacts on water flows, fisheries and agriculture as well the dangers of potential dam breaks. There is great concern that Asia World Company, notorious for poor construction standards, has been contracted to start building the Kunlong dam on Salween river in northern Shan State before the end of this year.

The Salween community groups warn that proceeding with the dams will only further inflame conflict in Burma at this time of fragile peace-building.

"Dispute over natural resources is a key driver of ethnic conflict in Burma, but Thailand is rushing to buy our river before this issue has ever been brought to the negotiation table. This will only stoke further war," said Nang Kham Leng of the Love Salween Group, attending the public forum in Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University on Thai investment in Burma's power sector.

“If the Salween dams go ahead, not only will refugees not be able to go back home, but more refugees will be fleeing to Thailand,” she said.

Community groups campaigning to protect the Salween river include the Shan Sapawa Environmental Organisations, Love Salween Group (Kayah State), Karenni Civil Society Network, Karen Rivers Watch, and the Mon Youth Progressive Organisation.

For more detailed information on the Salween dam projects in Burma, see www.burmariversnetwork.org

Contacts:

Nang Kham Leng (Love Salween Group)
Tel: 0861971526 (Burmese, Shan and Thai)

Sai Khur Hseng (Shan Sapawa)
Tel: +66816722031 (English, Thai, Shan and Burmese)