

IMPACTS OF VIETNAM'S YALI FALLS DAM REPORTED IN RATTANAKIRI

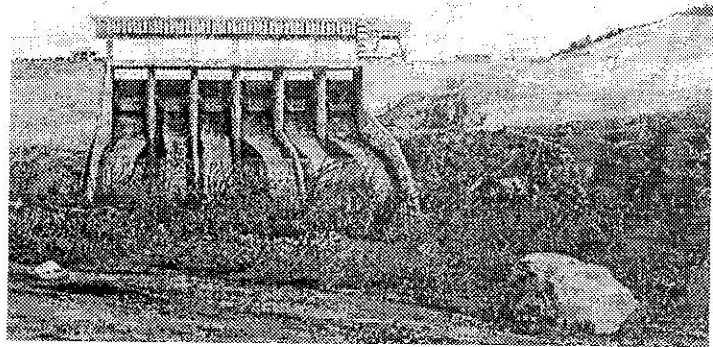
Village communities in Rattanakiri province, Cambodia have reported wildly fluctuating water levels in the Se San River during the past several months. Provincial authorities in Rattanakiri attribute the changes in the flow of the Se San River to water releases from the Yalo Falls dam, a 720 megawatt hydroelectric dam on the Se San River in Vietnam. The Se San River has its origin in Vietnam's Central Highlands and flows across the districts O Ya Dav, Andoung Meas, Ta Veang and Veun Sai in Rattanakiri province, and Se Sam district in Stung Treng province in northeastern Cambodia. Natural flows in the river include seasonal patterns of the river's flow volume rising and falling slowly over a period of months during the dry and rainy seasons.

In several incidents, beginning in late 1999, village people in Veun Say, Ta Veng and Andoung Meas districts reported surges of water that have caused water levels to increase sharply and suddenly within a period of a few hours, if not a few minutes. At least five people have drowned in incidents local people attribute to the sudden and unprecedented flash floods along the Se San River. Local people have also reported losing fishing equipment. Mr. Sokha, a fisher living in Andoung Meas district, reported that on a night he was sleeping next to the river to guard his fishing net the water level in the river began to rise rapidly at four or five in the morning. Mr. Sokha ran to save his net but he was not able to recover it, and gave up to avoid being swept away. The 1st net cost 70,000 riel (US\$18). According to the Second Vice-Governor of Andoung Meas district about 100 boats and other equipment, including pots containing prahoc (fermented fish) have been lost as a result of the flash floods.

Sudden floods have also impeded farmers' efforts to plant vegetable and tobacco gardens on exposed dry season river banks and several established gardens have been destroyed. Furthermore, local people report that the river becomes muddy and contains bubbles when the strange floods occur. People and livestock have become ill as a result of consuming the unclean water. This turbidity and the bubbles (containing nitric and methane gases) are characteristic of water released from a land area recently submerged

by a dam's reservoir. The US\$640 million Yali Falls hydropower project is the first of several planned hydroelectric dams planned on the Se San River, in Vietnam and Cambodia. The Yalo Falls dam is located in Gri Lai province, Vietnam, approximately 70 kilometres upstream of the Cambodia border. Construction began in 1993 and the projects is due to begin generating electricity in the next few months. The release of water stored in the reservoir through a newly constructed dam is required to determine that the dams floodgates and turbines are operational. An environmental impact study (EIA) for the Yali Falls dam was conducted by the Swiss dam consultant company, Electrowatt in 1993. According to

the EIA "The population in this area [downstream of the project] is very sparse, and are not dependent on the river in any way. There is no infrastructure of any sort which could be affected." In fact, the EIA only considered "an area of 8km long and 1km wide below the dam" for the purpose of the study. So, as people living in this area were deemed not



to exist and communities living along the Se San River further downstream of the Yali Falls dam were deemed to be outside the "affected" area, Electrowatt's EIA for the Yali Falls project completely ignored the downstream impacts on these communities in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Sources: EIA for Yali Falls Hydropower Project, Electrowatt, 1993. Letter from MRC to TERRA, 9.3.00. Interview with Mekong Secretaries, 21.2.95. Terra Briefing Paper, Damming the Se San, November 1999. Incident at the Se San River, Field Trip Report by Yang Saing Koma (CEDAC) and Chea Phalla (NTFP), 16.3.00. 'Party paper highlights delays', Power in Asia, 26.7.99