

# Damming the Mekong

China's plans to develop river worry its southern neighbors downstream

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Associated Press

DACHAOSHAN, China — As dams go, the one rising across this remote gorge in China's southwestern Yunnan province isn't large. When it's finished in December, the 30-story-high wall of concrete will hold a narrow, 55-mile-long reservoir that will take just five days to fill.

But critics worry about the Dachaoshan dam's location — on the Mekong River, a source of food and livelihood for 60 million people downstream in Southeast Asia.

Dachaoshan is part of a multibillion-dollar effort by Beijing to develop its upstream half of the 3,025-mile-long waterway. China says the construction is necessary to lift backward southwestern provinces such as Yunnan, home to 43 million people, out of poverty.

But critics warn that China is ignoring potentially disastrous effects on farms and fisheries in the other five countries that share the Mekong — Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Burma.

"China acts like it doesn't need to care about countries downstream. It has to recognize that the Mekong isn't just theirs," said Witoon Permpongsachareon, director of Terra, a Bangkok-based environmental group.

The \$600 million Dachaoshan is the second of at least eight hydroelectric dams that Beijing wants to build on the

region's most important waterway over the next two decades.

The first, at Manwan, was finished in 1993. Work is to begin next year on the Xiaowan dam, a \$4 billion structure the height of a 100-story building that will be the world's tallest dam.

Plans also call for dynamiting a shipping channel through the Mekong's extensive rapids, fulfilling Beijing's dream of turning the river into a link to Southeast Asia's export markets and raw materials.

China has already cleared its own rocks and built two river ports at the cities of Jinghong and Simao in Yunnan. In June, limited freight and passenger service opened to northern Laos and Burma.

In November, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji is to announce \$5 million in aid to Laos and Burma to blast another 180 miles of rapids in those countries, Chinese officials said.

They call the offer proof they're serious about promoting joint development.

"All countries will prosper equally from the increased trade," said Mei Ruichang, a spokesman for Yunnan's Navigation Affairs Bureau, which is overseeing the river-clearing work.

But critics say China is ignoring fears in Laos that destroying the rapids might damage tourism, a big money-earner for the impoverished country. They also complain that Beijing refuses to join regional efforts such as the four-nation Mekong River Commission to



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**The Dachaoshan dam** is shown Aug. 28 in Dachaoshan, Yunnan province, China. What has critics worried is the dam's location — on the Mekong River, a source of food and livelihood for 60 million people downstream in Southeast Asia.

coordinate development.

Likewise, skepticism has also met Chinese claims that dam building will benefit countries downstream.

China says the dams will ease the annual cycle of flooding and water shortages that accompany rainy and dry seasons.

But experts say that would spell disaster for critical fisheries, such as Cambodia's Great Lake — the main source of protein for the country's 12 million people. The lake depends on those yearly floods to replenish nutrients. Farmers in Laos also wait for the dry season to plant on the exposed river

bottom's fertile mud.

Critics fear the dams will block migration routes of rare species such as the giant freshwater catfish, which can weigh up to 650 pounds.

The dams could also slow the river's flow, raising water temperatures and possibly wiping out native fish species.

Chinese officials call these concerns exaggerated, though they admit that some environmental damage is inevitable. Still, they say, the dams are necessary to power Yunnan's industrialization and improve living conditions.

In Shandi, a village about a mile uphill from Dachaoshan, the first elec-

tricity came two years ago.

Lu Mingxie uses a single naked bulb to light her dirt-floor home as she shucks corn and peels dark green pumpkins. The 50-year-old farmer welcomes the progress.

But she, too, has her complaints about the Chinese government's high-handed way of bringing it about.

Lu says dam officials seized a three-quarter acre plot of good rice paddy near the dam that her family had farmed for six generations. They promised compensation, but she has yet to see any.

"Not everything about this dam is good for us common people," she said.