



*Statement: 14 March 2010*

**Drought brings severe hardship to riverside communities,  
demonstrates need for regional cooperation to protect Mekong River**

Saturday, March 14, is the International Day of Action for Rivers. As the Mekong suffers its worst drought in decades, painfully demonstrating the importance of the river to the region's people, and revived plans to build dams on the mainstream threaten the river's ecology and resources, this is a day to reflect upon the life-giving benefits that rivers provide, and to take action to protect the Mekong River for present and future generations.

**Severe Drought**

The Mekong River is facing an increasingly severe drought that holds serious implications for river-side communities and the wider population of the Mekong region. To date, the people of Yunnan Province of China, Eastern Shan State of Burma, North and Northeastern Thailand and Northern Lao have especially suffered. Fish catch has declined, water for irrigated agriculture, livestock and drinking has become scarce, and river transportation has been grounded, affecting trade and tourism.

The loss of fisheries, crops, livestock and drinking water has struck the livelihoods, food security and economies of some of the region's poorest communities. In the context of the ongoing global economic crisis, these communities have few alternative means to see them through this disaster.

There is a high likelihood of far wider impacts throughout the Mekong basin, as the river is usually at its lowest in April and May. In Laos, river-side communities are already reporting scarcity of fish and lack of water for dry season, river bank horticulture. In Cambodia, the drought threatens the massive fisheries productivity of the Tonle Sap Lake, where the total fish catch each year is proportional to the extent of flooding, and is central to Cambodia's food security and economy. In the Mekong delta in Vietnam, where over 10 million farmers and fishers live, saltwater intrusion threatens the farming and fisheries and has been reported in some places to have already extended nearly 60 kilometers in land, which is double the usual extent.

**Mekong River Commission: Negligence**

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) issued a statement on the drought on 26 February 2010, over two weeks after the media began reporting the severity of the situation. The statement attributes the exceptionally low Mekong River water-levels to a "drier than normal" wet season in 2009 combined with "a consistent pattern of monthly precipitation significantly below average amounts since September 2009" in Yunnan Province China, Northern Thailand and Northern Laos.

Given these apparently clear indicators foreshadowing the severity of the drought, available since at least September 2009, and that the MRC Secretariat is charged with monitoring this data, the MRC Secretariat's failure to warn the public and instigate precautionary actions amounts to a serious negligence on its part.

This situation mirrors the earlier failure of the MRC Secretariat in August 2008 to warn with sufficient notice communities in Northern Thailand and Northern Laos whose livelihoods were devastated by the flooding. This failure was widely criticized by communities and NGOs at the time, and the recurrent situation indicates serious systemic incompetence within the MRC.

The Save the Mekong coalition remains disappointed over the MRC Secretariat's poor record on transparency, access to data and belated action, now for the drought conditions as well as on the proposed Mekong mainstream dams, and calls for a public review of the MRC Secretariat's performance.

### **China's dams**

The MRC has sought to exonerate China's dams on the Mekong River's upper mainstream (Lancang) from the severity of the drought in its reports and through the media. The MRC has taken this position despite the fact that neither China nor the MRC have publicly released data supporting this position. China began filling the reservoir of the Xiaowan Dam - the world's highest arch dam and the fourth built on the Lancang – in October 2009. This timing, and the subsequent drop in downstream flows, coincides with the MRC's identified onset of the drought.

It is not surprising that communities in downstream countries are suspicious of the Lancang dams' contribution to the current drought. Changes to the Mekong River's daily hydrology and sediment load since the early 1990s have already been linked to the operation of the Lancang dam cascade by academics. As a result, communities downstream in Northern Thailand, Burma and Laos have suffered loss of fish and aquatic plant resources impacting local economies and livelihoods. These dams in China have been built without consultation, apology, disclosure of data, compensation or restitution, all of which are now long overdue.

The first turbine of the Manwan dam – the first dam built on the Lancang - came online in 1992, coinciding with the 1992-1993 Mekong drought. Construction of the second Lancang dam was completed in October 2003, coinciding with the 2003-2004 drought. Construction of the third dam, Jinghong, was completed in late 2008. The Xiaowan Dam, presently filling its reservoir, has a reservoir capacity approximately five times larger than that of the combined storage of these three earlier dams.

The role that these dams played in earlier droughts has never been clarified or communicated; instead the facts have often been muddled. The Thai National Mekong Committee, for example, in a report this year on the drought identified the Manwan Dam to have started operation in 1994, rather than 1992, thus masking the potential implications of the dam during the 1992-3 drought.

The extreme suffering of the drought-stricken farmers in Yunnan province, China, is shared by fishers and farmers in Thailand and Laos. The Save the Mekong Coalition therefore makes a direct appeal to the Chinese Government to equitably share the remaining water resources between countries to alleviate to the extent possible the suffering of all river-dependent communities.

On 10 March 2010, the Bangkok Post reported that Chinese officials have invited the lower Mekong country governments to visit the Jinghong dam to inspect the water levels. In addition, the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok held a press conference on March 11 to state their position on the situation. The Save the Mekong Coalition welcomes these gestures of increasing transparency and disclosure.

The easiest and most accountable way for China to build trust with downstream communities and demonstrate that its dams are not compounding the impacts of the current drought would be to invite representatives of civil society as observers to the inspection trip to Jinghong, and to extend the trip to all four Lancang dam projects.

Disclosure of all the data regarding rainfall, river and reservoir water-levels, and dam operation since the mid-1980s, when dam construction started, together with subsequent regular public reporting on dam operation and water levels, would build further trust with downstream neighbors. This should lead to negotiation with downstream countries over reparation for the project's existing impacts and restitution to minimize future impacts.

### **Mekong Mainstream Dams: Threat to Ecosystems, Livelihoods and Food Security**

In addition to plans for up to fifteen dams on the Lancang (upper Mekong) mainstream in China, the Mekong River is threatened by plans for eleven hydropower dams on the lower mainstream in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand which, if built, would have severe consequences on a regional scale. By blocking the river's massive fish migrations, building these dams would place at risk the millions of people who depend upon the Mekong for their income, livelihood and food security. Experience around the world demonstrates that there is no way of mitigating such large dams' impacts on fisheries.

The Save the Mekong Coalition has consistently called for all actors to protect the Mekong River for present and future generations. We emphasize the importance of the river for the food security of millions of people throughout the region. Conveying this message, in October 2009, a 23,110 signature petition was sent to the Prime Ministers of Cambodia, Lao, Thailand and Vietnam. The petition was also sent to the Chairpersons of the National Mekong Committees (NMCs) of Cambodia, Lao, Thailand and Vietnam calling for a strong and trusted consultative process at the national and local level on development options for the Mekong River, which guarantees the participation of all riparian communities.

The present severe drought and the extreme floods of 2008 testify to the dynamic nature of the river, but also to its seasonal variation and the need for a far more cautious approach to human intervention in the river's future. More dams are not the solution to a warming world. The Save the Mekong Coalition is very concerned about recent announcements by the Thai government that has sought to justify dam construction to fix the drought, including the Ban Koum and Pak Chom mainstream dams. Building dams on the Lancang-Mekong River's mainstream will further undermine the river's resilience. The Save the Mekong Coalition calls for a better approach that sustainably meets energy needs whilst at the same time protecting the region's rivers.

### **Urgent Regional Cooperative Action Required**

The severe drought highlights once again the importance of the Mekong River and its resources to all riparian communities that live along it, as well as the wider Mekong basin population.

Cooperation under the MRC has failed to ensure a coordinated and preemptive response to the drought. Under these exceptional circumstances, it is critical that the Mekong region's governments, including China, proactively work together to share information and forge a cooperative response to work with riverside communities along the entire length of the river to minimize the drought's economic, social and environmental costs.

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***The Save the Mekong coalition*** is a network of non-government organizations, community groups, academics, journalists, artists, fishers, farmers and ordinary people from within the Mekong countries and internationally. For more information on the coalition and the impacts of the planned Mekong mainstream dams in English and regional languages, please visit: [www.SavetheMekong.org](http://www.SavetheMekong.org).