

## Water management

### Keywords

- > Dams
- > Hydropower
- > Burma / Myanmar
- > China
- > Successful mobilization
- > Ethnic insurgency

This is a provisional success story in 2011 in stopping a very large dam already under construction and scheduled for completion in 2019 in the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy River, the life-line of Burma. It is located in Kachin territory, an ethnic group which has often been in armed rebellion against the state.

### The Myitsone dam project

The dam was to provide about 6,000 MW of power (comparable but smaller than the Three Gorges in China, Itaipu in Brazil-Paraguay, Guri in Venezuela which have around 10,000 MW).

This US\$ 3.6 billion dam is one of several planned along the river. The main contractor was **China Power Investment Corporation (CPI)**. China was to be an important customer for the hydroelectricity produced, getting perhaps 90 per cent of it. If built, the Irrawaddy Myitsone Dam would inundate approximately 766 km<sup>2</sup> of forested area.

There is apparently no legal obligation in Burma to conduct any assessment. Still, the China Power Investment Corporation did commission a study by Chinese and Burmese experts, part of which became available to activists.

### Potential impacts

The dam was planned at a short distance away from the birthplace of the Irrawaddy River, at the confluence of two rivers considered a sacred place (as it happens with the “prayag” of the Himalayan and other rivers in India). The reservoir would submerge important historical and cultural sites at the Mali and N'mai Hka rivers that together make the Irrawaddy.

The projected dam is located in a region that is recognized as one world's biodiversity hotspots and a global conservation priority. The jungle area that was to be flooded contains bears, leopards, elephants, red pandas and many species of monkeys.



*The dam on the Irrawaddy River, the lifeblood of Burma, would create a reservoir bigger than Singapore*

*Photo by AP (in BBC News, Sept. 30, 2011)*

Alternatives have been suggested, like building much smaller dams, to prevent to some extent the damage to the fish populations downstream.

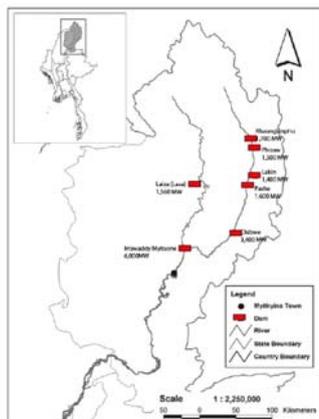
### Protests against the dam

The displacement of thousands of people already under way and the low quality of the EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) commissioned (without legal obligation) by the Chinese company had caused protests both at the national level and at the local level. Much support also came from outside Burma.

The recent thaw in the political situation, with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi no longer in house arrest, encouraged the opposition to the dam. The Peace Nobel Prize winner wrote an open letter pointing out the risks of the dam because it was to be built near an earthquake fault line. She wrote also that the Irrawaddy river, that crosses the entire territory of the country from north to south, from glaciers in the eastern Himalaya to the fertile delta rich in rice paddies, is “a prolific source of food, the home of varied water flora and fauna, the supporter of traditional modes of life, the muse that has inspired countless works of prose and poetry”.

One element in the dispute is the sporadic fighting between government troops and ethnic insurgents in jungle areas near the borders with China and Thailand, including areas close to some of the planned dams. It was reported





**Map of Irrawaddy Dams**  
Image by Burma Rivers Network



**Protest against the project, near the Myanmar Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia**  
Photo by AP (in India Times, Sept. 22, 2011)



**The Myitsone dam under construction**  
Photo by International Herald Tribune, Sept. 21, 2011

that resentment over the dams is a significant contributing factor to the military conflicts between the ethnic groups and the government.

### Outcome of the process

On September 30, 2011, it was reported that President Thein Sein had sent a letter to the Parliament announcing that the Myitsone dam project would be suspended because “*it is against the will of the people.*”

The Burma Rivers Network (BRN) made the following statement on that date:

*The BRN is encouraged by news that President Thein Sein plans to stop the construction of the Irrawaddy Myitsone Dam, but urges the people of Burma to demand an official declaration and pull-out of all personnel and equipment from the dam site by the project-holder, China Power Investment (CPI). BRN also urges continued pressure on the military government and the CPI to immediately cancel the other 6 mega-dams planned on the Irrawaddy source rivers, which will have the same devastating impacts on the country.*

If the Myitsone project is indeed cancelled, this would be a great victory for the people of Burma, especially the brave villagers at the Myitsone site who stood up to the Burma Army and refused to make way for the project. However, China Power Investment is now in control of the Myitsone site and only their actions will confirm whether the dam is indeed suspended. There needs to be an official statement by CPI announcing this, and the Myitsone construction camps must be closed. Most importantly the people who were forced to move to the Myitsone dam relocation camp must be allowed to return their homes.

In conclusion, the conflict has not yet been finally solved. There is the view that President Thein Sein is presenting this decision internally and worldwide as evidence of its willingness to listen and to work in the interests of the people as the country moves slowly towards democracy after many years of military dictatorship. Critics interpret the move as a public relations gimmick which can be reversed at any moment, depending perhaps on the intensity of Chinese pressure. The Myitsone project has, after all, only been suspended, not cancelled.

### Lessons from this case

There are then many valuation languages deployed in this conflict. The legal process and the administrative process (for instance, in terms of a participatory EIA) seem to have failed completely while the dam was being built although the Chinese company stated repeatedly that it complied with the internal legislation. The need for electricity in China and the money revenues for Burma have been a factor but also ethnic rights and national pride,

#### More on this case

- Burma Rivers Network  
[www.burmariversnetwork.org](http://www.burmariversnetwork.org)
- International Rivers  
[www.internationalrivers.org](http://www.internationalrivers.org)

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2005	CPI and Asia World establish joint venture to build hydropower projects in seven locations along Mali Hka and Nmai Hka rivers.
2006	MoU between the Ministry of Electric Power and CPI Corp (Dec. 28 <sup>th</sup> )
2007	Agreement to build the dams is signed
2008	Yunnan Power Investment Co Ltd is created for the development, construction and operation of hydropower projects on the Irrawaddy
2009	Terms of reference for EIA, approved (Mar.) Construction stage 1 (out of 5) begins on the Myitsone Dam site. The resettlement of people begins (Dec.)
2010	EIA report finalised (March) Blasts at the Myitstone Dam site (April)
2011	Fighting erupts government troops and ethnic insurgents, affecting the construction site (Jun.) Announcement of the Myitsone dam project suspension (Sep.)
2019	Target date for completion

### Chronology of major events

Adapted from *International Rivers* (2011b)



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the cultural and religious values of the river, the values of its ecological services for downstream production of food and fisheries, and also the assessment of the uncertain risks of earthquakes as in so many of the new dams in the Himalaya.

As in other political transition processes, environmental activists have had enhanced opportunities for influential action. This usually goes on for some time at least, until the new political regimes stabilize. This is not yet the case in Burma

Representatives of the Chinese government asked Burma to protect the rights of Chinese companies after construction was halted in late September 2011. The Foreign Ministry representative, Hong Lei, said tersely on 1st October 2011 that *the Chinese Government always supports Chinese enterprises cooperating with enterprises of other countries based on the principle of mutual respect, mutual benefit and equality, requires them to perform duties and fulfil obligations in strict accordance with laws and regulations of the host country and urges relevant government to protect the legal and legitimate rights and interests of Chinese enterprises. The Myitsone Dam is a jointly invested project between China and Myanmar that has gone through scientific verification and strict examination of both sides. Relevant matters arising from the implementation of the project should be handled appropriately through bilateral friendly consultation.*

The success in stopping the Myitsone dam and other dams in the Irrawaddy, if permanent, would add weight to environmental complaints in many other countries (also in Africa and Latin America) where Chinese companies are engaged in infrastructure, mining and fossil fuel extraction projects.

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