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Climate Change Paints Mekong Dams ◆Green◆

From *mekong currents* By Rosalia Sciortino*

BANGKOK, Dec 31 (IPS Asia-Pacific) - As more severe and irregular floods occur in the countries of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), public discussion on their possible causes has been escalating. A point of contention is whether floods along the Mekong River and other regional rivers are related to the operation of dams in combination with ever-increasing deforestation and subsequent land erosion, or whether the increase in water volume is due to natural circumstances, eventually impacted by climate change. Revival of Dams The debate on human and nature-induced disasters is particularly timely because of the growing number of dams populating the Mekong River and other rivers in the GMS. A cascade of eight dams is being built in the Upper Mekong --Lancang River as the Chinese call it -- and 11 more are planned on the Mekong's River lower mainstream, not counting the dams and reservoirs on the river's tributaries. Dams are also being built on the Irrawaddy and Salween rivers, and there are plans for hydropower projects on rivers flowing from the Cardamom Mountains and on the Xeset River. China is generally the focus of attention, being the most advanced in hydropower development and because of its position upstream and the sheer size of its dam projects. But its downstream neighbours have not been sitting idle either. Laos aspires to become ◆the battery of Asia◆ by building and operating seven large hydropower dams on the Mekong and many smaller ones on its other rivers, and more than 60 dams are planned on the waterways of Burma to satisfy the demand for electricity of Thailand, China and Vietnam. *Mekong Mainstream Dam Plans Source: International Rivers, August 2009:3* The current enthusiasm for dam construction contrasts with the widespread disillusionment of the early 1990s, when the negative social and environmental impacts of large dams had become increasingly documented and recognised. After problematic experiences with large dam projects in Brazil, India and elsewhere, governments and their major international investors, especially the World Bank, largely pulled out of large dam construction. In Thailand, in 1988, the decision to build the Nam Choan Dam was reversed following pressure from the growing environmental movement. The government and its financial backers abstained from exploring other dam sites, although they did go ahead with the construction of Pak Mun Dam, to this day criticised for harming the river's ecology and for failing to be economically viable. Yet, the dam construction agenda was gradually reintroduced in the mid-1990s following the GMS countries' adoption of a regional integration model that prioritises the construction of large-scale infrastructure. Projects include expansion and renovation of roads, railroads and bridges to facilitate movement and trade, and construction of hydropower dams to generate energy. Hydropower sector development is again a favoured investment opportunity. After a decade of refraining from "risky projects", the World Bank in March 2005 approved the 1.3-billion U.S. dollar Nam Theun 2 hydropower dam project in Laos, and the Asian Development Bank contributed additional funding soon after. Climate Change: A Convenient Argument? The revival of dams worries environment experts, civil society and riparian communities because in their view, they cause the forced resettlement of people, harm water quality, destroy river systems, thus negatively affecting those dependent on the rivers' waters. Unconvinced by environmental impact assessments and amelioration exercises, they call for a halt to dam construction in the region. Thai NGOs have carried out protests against the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), demanding that it stops sponsoring dam projects in Thailand and on the Mekong and Salween rivers in Laos and Burma. In China, broad-based environmental and social justice protests have been catalysed by ambitious plans to dam major rivers in Yunnan and Sichuan provinces. In dealing with this unrelenting opposition, a new pro-dam discourse has developed. In addition to emphasising the benefits of dam construction in fueling economic growth, the importance of hydropower for climate change adaptation and mitigation is being stressed with increasing frequency. Already in 2007, the then-CEO of the Mekong River Commission, Oliver Cogels, declared in the 'Bangkok Post' that electricity was essential to poverty alleviation and sustainable development and that hydropower had the potential to meet the increasing demand for energy in South-east Asia, "in a much 'cleaner' way than other power generation techniques using coal, fuel oil or

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natural gas. Hydropower has the big advantage of producing electricity without carbon emission and the respective impact on global warming". The most important part of the argument is the need for a region with high energy growth forecasts to start to rely more on renewable energy and reduce dependence on polluting --as well as finite and expensive fossil fuels. Among the alternatives, hydropower is presented as the most suitable, with solar and wind energy being dismissed as too small scale, intermittent and cost-ineffective and the proposition of nuclear power encountering even larger public resistance. Legitimation in painting dams as climate-friendly options for large-scale energy production --as well as pecuniary advantage-- is being sought through the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), with Laos' Xeset 2 Dam having become the first GMS hydropower project to apply for CDM carbon credit support. Hydrological control through dams would supposedly further contribute to the mitigation of climate change impacts, by enhancing a country's ability to regulate and store water, limiting the threat of flooding and drought and optimising the river utility for human purposes. Even if there are scientific questions about the actual extent of the climate change adaptation and mitigation potential of dams, governments and donors have embraced the claim that "hydropower meets the realities of climate change", as the World Bank Group puts it in a recent report explaining its renewed commitment to invest in dams and other hydro infrastructure projects. It would seem then that climate change provides a pretext and a milieu in which dams can once again be made acceptable by being cast as a clean, renewable source of power in an energy-hungry region and one in which transboundary electricity sales are a significant economic resource. In the name of climate change, dams can be promoted and "traditional" concerns of biodiversity loss, destruction of natural and heritage sites and human rights abuses surrounding resettlement have become relegated to the background. This is not to say that climate change is simply a diversionary issue for the GMS. Indeed, the region has been assessed as one of the most vulnerable in the world when it comes to the impacts of global warming and rising sea levels. What is badly needed is an understanding of the politics and economic interests inherent in the selective use of the climate change discourse, in order to ensure that adaptation and mitigation measures put a halt to environmental degradation and social exclusion instead of aggravating them by embracing controversial renewable energy options. *(This column is an adapted version of an article written with Philip Hirsch entitled 'Climate Change and the Resource Politics of the Greater Mekong Subregion' to be published by Chiang Mai University in 2010).* *Rosalia Sciortino, better known as Lia, is a cultural anthropologist and development sociologist associated with the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University. A native of Italy, she has gained extensive experience in international development in Southeast Asia working as Regional Director of the Rockefeller Foundation Office for Southeast Asia in Bangkok and with the Ford Foundation in Indonesia and the Philippines. She has lived in the region for almost two decades and published widely on development issues.

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