

Laos Dams the Greenies; Launches Great Water and Rail Projects

by Ron Castonguay

Nov. 15—The small, underdeveloped, underpopulated Southeast Asian country of Laos chose the most conspicuous moment possible to announce its decision to move into the modern developed world as quickly as possible. In conjunction with the Ninth Asia-Europe Meeting Summit (ASEM), in the Laotian capital of Vientiane in early November, Laos announced that it will proceed with the construction of three great projects: the controversial \$3.5 billion Xayaburi hydro-power dam on the Mekong River; the Chinese-funded \$7 billion high-speed rail link from Vientiane, north into China; and the Malaysian-funded \$5 billion East-West rail route that will link Thailand with Vietnam through the Lao panhandle.

The contrast with the rapidly accelerating collapse of the trans-Atlantic economies could not be more dramatic. The unfolding transformation of Laos—a country denied “normal” diplomatic recognition by the U.S. until 2004, as a leftover from the U.S. war on Indochina—is due to the united efforts of nearly all the Asian nations, which, unlike those in the West, still believe that development is more important than sustaining bankrupt speculators in the banking system.

The go-ahead on the Xayaburi Dam, announced in front of the 50 or so heads of state from Europe and Asia attending ASEM, was especially notable, given that most of the European notables were rabid haters of development. London’s environmentalist NGOs have waged a fierce battle internationally to sabotage the dam, and declared victory last December, when members of the Mekong River Commission’s council, consisting of water and environment ministers from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, urged a delay to allow further environmental research.

In response, the Lao government and its chief partner in the project, Thailand’s CH. Karnchang Public

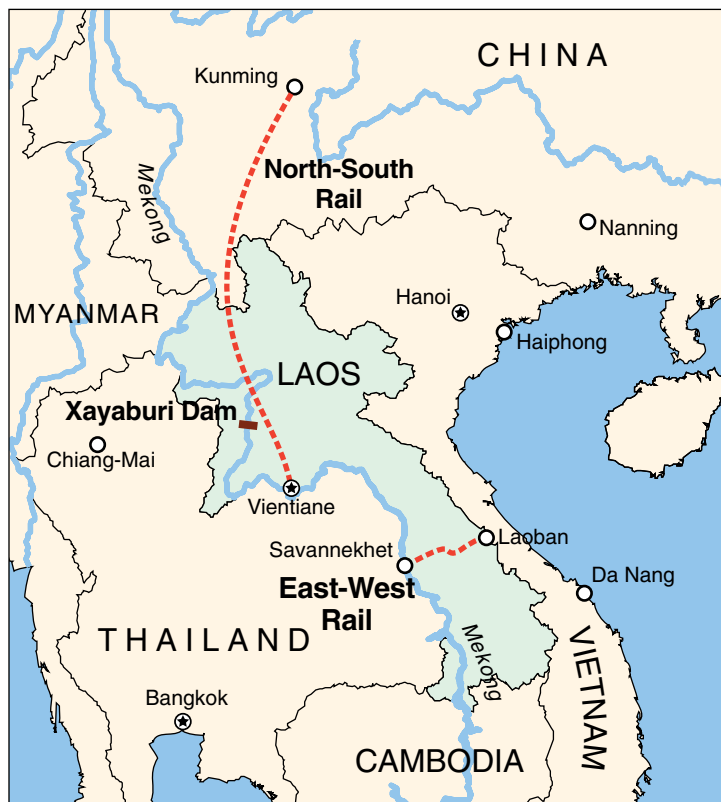
Co. Ltd., engaged experts to examine the issues of fish migration up and down the Mekong, and the siltification of the waters behind the dam. The company then agreed to spend an additional \$100 million to revamp the design of a fish ladder and sediment-flow gates meeting legitimate concerns.

“They have no more serious complaints on the re-design of the dam,” Viraphonh Viravong, Laos’s Deputy Minister of Energy and Mines, said of Laos’s neighbors. “The Lao government is confident that with all these changes, there will be no serious environmental impact, and that’s why we’ve decided to go ahead.” “Xayaburi is a very good project,” Viraphonh continued. “The financing is there, and if we don’t go ahead what are we expected to do? Solar farming? It’s too expensive.”

Ninety percent of the power from this 1,280 megawatt dam, and much of the power from the other 10 planned Mekong dams for the river, will be sold to Thailand, which has a growing industrial base. However, the remaining 10% of power that Laos will retain for its own development is a great and important addition to its currently very limited power resources.

Within days of the Xayaburi announcement, Cambodia and Vietnam, both of which had initially opposed the dam for environmental reasons, gave their consent to the revised plan. Although both the Vietnamese ambassador to Laos, Ta Minh Chau, and the Cambodian ambassador to Laos, Yi Dan, attended the ground-breaking ceremony, the green Western press continues to emphasize the “opposition” to the project. For example, the British intelligence outlet *Asia Sentinel*’s Nov. 14 edition writes that “three downstream governments—Vietnam, Cambodia and seven Thai provincial governments—have in particular objected to the construction of the Xayaburi Dam.” Next-door Thailand, which not only has a long-term contract for power from the dam, but is also financing and building

FIGURE 1



it, clearly supports the project, despite some locally stirred up opposition.

The dam will generate \$450 million yearly, of which the Lao government will receive direct income of about \$135 million—a significant sum for a country with a population of just over 6 million, most of whom are small farmers.

Two Great Asian Rail Projects

The announced Lao rail projects are just as important as the Xayaburi Dam and those planned for the future. The country today is land-locked, but the construction of the railroads will make it, in the words of one promoter, “land-linked.”

The Chinese and Malaysian rail projects total 400 miles (640 km), which is a massive increase over the 2 miles (3.4 km) of existing rail in Laos, extending from the Thai border to Vientiane. When completed, in about five years, Vientiane will have rail connections to South China, Vietnam and its Pacific ports, and Thailand, with its links to the Gulf of Thailand and the Indian Ocean.

The East-West route will be built by Malaysia’s Giant Consolidated Ltd., which was awarded a contract to construct and operate the 140-mile (99-km) railway from Savannekhet, on Laos’s southwestern border with Thailand, to the Lao Bao border gate with Vietnam in the East. It is a double-track railway for passengers and for merchandise transport, running mostly through rice fields. Work is scheduled to start in January.

Last month, the parliament approved plans to launch the North-South route from Vientiane to southern China’s Yunnan province. A Chinese company was originally to build the railway line, but backed out of the deal. China will, however, finance the project. It will link Vientiane to Luang Namtha province along the border with China, with the network linked further to Yunnan’s capital of Kunming. The *Vientiane Times* said that Laos had decided to assume sole ownership of the project, because “transforming the country from being landlocked to a land link is central to the future of the nation’s development.”

In a short article on the opening of Laos by rail, photographer Ore Huiying writes: “Imagine a day when it is possible to take a train continuously from London to Singapore.”

Ore quotes a professional Greenie, Shamali Guttal, senior researcher for the NGO Focus on the Global South, who is violently against any such rail projects: “Shamali ... highlighted that the railway will open up parts of Laos that are currently not connected to other areas.” Humans would think that this is a *good* thing. But, no: “She said this could lead to distress migration, increased illegal logging and accelerated natural resource depletion.” Not to mention psoriasis, bad hair days, *ad nauseam*.

“Rural villagers,” she continued, “who depend on the land for their livelihood, are likely to be most affected by the railway developments, having little to no control over the decision making.” Of course, with the development of a modern transport network, the villagers would at least have the possibility of traveling to the capital to have their voice heard in person.

With Ore’s article is a video on the proposed rail construction that includes other local complaints, such as, that local people will get only a portion of the reve-



Creative Commons/International Rivers

Laos is determined to construct the \$3.5 billion hydropower dam on the Mekong River as quickly as possible—over the loud protests of the “back to the Stone Age” greenie NGOs. The construction site is shown here.

nue, or they will not be properly compensated for their land. These are serious and proper questions, if asked in a spirit of good will. The nature of a proper answer to these and similar questions is contained in the further question: “What will be of greatest benefit to the villagers’ grandchildren, and their progeny?”

The International Rivers (IR) NGO has spearheaded the environmentalist fight against all attempts to harness rivers for the benefit of man by controlling water flows and generating power. A spinoff from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (a creation of the British genocidalist Sir Julian Huxley [1887-1975], first director general of UNESCO) IR was founded in 1985. IR has never found a dam it didn’t hate. Its specialty is “caring for” the communities affected by dam construction; that is, creating a facade of local opposition to legitimize IR’s attempts to prevent and undo human progress. It is worth noting that hydropower-generated electricity constitutes almost all the installed, functioning “alternative” power generation worldwide. Green power advocates in Japan will tout the fact that 10% of electricity in that country comes from alternative sources; actually 90% of this so-called “alternative” energy is hydropower, which IR would have prevented if it could have. As always, fraud and illusion form the basis of environ-

mentalist claims for a “livable” world; only a world devoid of living people could ever meet Green goals.

One Laotian, Thone Siharath, is organizing optimistically for the contribution that Laos can make towards human development. Inspired by the LaRouche Political Action Committee’s work on [NAWAPA](#) (the North American Water and Power Alliance), Thone has been working on a “National Plan for Laos” based on the geology and meteorological conditions of the country. Laos is separated on its eastern border with Vietnam by a 600-mile (1,000-km)-long

mountain range, the Annamite Cordillera. The Mekong River runs along this natural barrier, and has carved out deep channels which can be easily dammed. The Laotian government already has projected dams for hydroelectric power in many of these locations, but as of yet, does not have developed conceptions of how to utilize the excess water, partly supplied by Laos’s generous monsoon rains. NAWAPA seeks to transport the overabundant waters of the American continent’s Northwest, to the water-short Southwest. Perhaps, argues Thone, a South East Asia Water and Power Alliance (SEAWAPA) can supply water to the ultra-dry Central-North of Asia, while helping to control the flooding in the South.

From Destruction to Development

Laos was the recipient of as many as 260 million American cluster bombs during the Indochina War in the 1960s and 1970s—perhaps the most heavily bombed country in history. It is fighting back in the most powerful way possible by developing its country. The members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have a vested interest in seeing Laos succeed. The wiser among their leaders know that a poor neighbor benefits nobody, and regional infrastructure lifts all at once.