

More than 20 killed and hundreds missing from dam disaster in Laos

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At least 26 people have been killed and 170 are missing after a major hydropower dam construction site collapsed on Monday night in Attapeu province in southern Laos. Seven villages were devastated and more than 6,600 people rendered homeless after a 30-foot wall of water hit the area.

The Xe-pian Xe-Namnoy project consists of two major dams and five smaller auxiliary earth-filled dams. “Saddle Dam D,” one of the auxiliary dams, failed after several days of heavy monsoonal rains.

Construction inspectors reported damage to the dam on July 23. Following a letter from the Laos’s Resettlement Office, government authorities issued an evacuation order the next day, but it was too late.

The dam collapsed at 8 p.m. on July 24, sending around 5 billion cubic metres of water, equivalent to approximately 2 million Olympic swimming pools, into the valley below. Thousands of homes were destroyed in the downstream neighbouring villages of Yai Thae, Hinlad, Mai, Thasengchan, Tha Hin and Samong.

Media reports show hundreds of people stranded on the roofs of their inundated homes and villagers seeking to escape in overcrowded longboats or wading through floodwaters with children and their possessions. Makeshift disaster relief centres have been established, with hundreds of people seeking shelter in local schools and fields.

Rescue efforts have been hampered by the lack of phone signals in the flooded areas, ongoing heavy rains and strong winds, and poor roads. Survivors are in desperate need of medical assistance, adequate shelter, food and water supplies.

Ian Baird, described as an expert on Laos from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told the Reuters news agency: “People don’t usually go in that area during the rainy season. There are mountains nearby

that villagers might be able to get up on.”

The Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy project, Baird said, had “managed the water in the reservoir very poorly, and so they are responsible.”

The *International Rivers* website claims that many of the dams were not appropriately “designed to be able to cope with extreme weather events.”

SK Engineering and Construction, a South Korean corporation, which has a major stake in the project, sought to deflect attention away from the broader social issues involved in the tragedy. It claimed that higher than usual rainfall was responsible for the dam collapse.

Heavy monsoon rains, however, are a regular occurrence in the impoverished, landlocked country, which is bordered by China, Vietnam, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand and Cambodia.

Laos, which has a population of about seven million people, is one the poorest countries in the world. It was subjected to massive carpet bombing by the US during the Vietnam War.

Electricity is Laos’s major export earner. The Xe-pian Xe-Namnoy project is one of many dams being built along the Mekong River. In 2017, Laos had 46 operational hydroelectric power plants and scores of others under construction.

The ruling Stalinist Lao People’s Revolutionary Party government in Vientiane, the capital, is acutely nervous about the catastrophe and its political impact on the region.

The national and provincial governments have systematically silenced opposition to village relocations, disruptions to rural agriculture and other social and economic problems caused by dam construction projects.

In an effort to assuage public anger, Prime Minister

Thongloun Sisoulith visited the affected area, calling on local governments to assist in emergency relief efforts.

A Vientiane-based commentator told the *Asian Times*: “We are not good at talking about disasters here, especially if there is a possibility that someone in government may be blamed.”

The \$US1.02 billion Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy project includes South Korean, Thai and Laotian investors. It began construction in 2013 and was due for completion later this year, with plans to begin commercial operations next year.

A similar disaster occurred last year when the Nam Ao River hydropower dam in northeastern Laos burst during construction, flooding a number of regional villages. There were no reported deaths. An investigation into the reservoir found that the construction was faulty because it was being built on unstable marshland.

Following last year’s dam collapse, Energy and Mining Minister Khammany Inthilath called for the cancellation of hydropower projects that did not meet technical and construction safety standards. It is not clear however, whether any real changes have been made in the past 12 months.

One analyst told the *Asian Times* that the resources and skills to properly oversee the large number of hydropower projects in Laos are at a bare minimum. Construction projects often bypass basic safety standards to meet deadlines and the demands from international investors. The working class and most oppressed layers bear the brunt of such profit-driven irresponsibility.



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