

# Death toll continues to climb from Laos dam disaster

John Harris  
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The official death toll has risen to 33, one week after the \$1.2 billion joint-venture Xe-Pian Xe Namnoy hydropower dam collapsed in southern Laos's Attapeu province, sending five billion cubic metres of water sweeping through 13 rural villages. Laotian government authorities have warned, however, that unknown numbers victims could be buried in deep mud and debris or were carried away by the deluge.

Government officials claim that 98 people are missing but deputy secretary of Attapeu's provincial committee, Meenaporn Chaichompoo, told Al Jazeera last week that over 1,120 people are still unaccounted for. Survivors suggest that the death toll is far higher than official figures and that up to 300 people could have been killed. It was the second dam collapse in Laos in the past year.

Bounna Eemchanthavong, 61, told the media that about 650 people lived in his village before it was devastated but only 65 of them had been found at local shelters.

Tran Van Bien, 47, a resident from Ban Mai village said that he was told to evacuate just two hours before the dam collapsed on Monday evening. He described how he had to rush to his neighbour's home with his family as his home was destroyed by the floodwaters, "We were on the roof of that house the whole night, cold and scared. At 4 a.m. a wooden boat passed and I decided to send my wife and my kid out."

Another survivor, Silam, a 25-year-old mother of two, said that she did not receive any government warning that the dam was about to collapse. She received a last minute phone call from one of her relatives telling her to run to higher ground as the water hit a nearby rice field.

While water levels have receded in Attapeu province, 6,000 remain homeless and up to 25,000 residents

across the border in Northern Cambodia have been forced to evacuate their homes and villages as the floodwaters moved down stream.

The dam collapse devastated the limited transport and communication infrastructure in Attapeu, which is one of Laos's most impoverished provinces and has the country's highest child-malnutrition rates. The UN reports that the region's water transport network as well as 14 bridges and numerous roads have been severely damaged. Many of the worst affected locations are only accessible by helicopter.

Poor communications and slow rescue and clean-up operations are subjecting thousands to greater risks of malaria and waterborne diseases which are already endemic throughout the region.

The clean-up effort is also complicated by the legacy of US imperialism's carpet bombing of the country during the Vietnam War. Laos remains the most heavily bombed country per capita in history. More than two million tons of ordnance was dropped on the small country from 1964 to 1973—equal to a planeload of bombs every 8 minutes, 24-hours a day, for nine years.

According to a UN report, at least 94 percent of the villages in Attapeu province are "contaminated" by thousands of unexploded bombs. Many of these will have been dislodged by the floods.

South Korea's SK Engineering & Construction Company, which was in charge of construction has attempted to deflect attention from its responsibility for the disaster. It blamed the collapse on heavy monsoonal rains. Korea Western Power Co, another major partner in joint venture, claimed last Thursday that it was still "too early to define whether it was a natural disaster or a manmade disaster."

In fact, there were 10 fractures reported at the dam

site on Sunday night before the collapse on Monday. An operator working for Korea Western Power also told the AFP news agency that there was 11 centimetres of subsidence found at the dam's centre on the Friday before the dam collapse and that alarm bells should have been rung sooner.

Hydropower expert Bruce Shoemaker pointed to irresponsible practices and negligence at dam projects across Laos. He told the *New York Times* on July 27: "The big thing is there's a very poor regulatory environment in Laos... private companies get these concessions and there's very little oversight of how they're implementing it ... that is pervasive throughout the hydropower sector."

Richard Meehan, a former dam builder and adjunct professor at Stanford University's School of Engineering, told the *Times* that the potential for a dam collapse is "all the more likely when the project is deeply profit-driven, geographically remote, and managed by multiple entities with conflicting interests, poor communications, and zero patience for what they take to be fussy details or delays."

There are 51 existing hydroelectric projects already operating in Laos with 46 under construction. Another 112 are at the development stage.

Last week Lao Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith announced an "Ad Hoc Committee" to "assess the losses and find out the true causes" of the disaster.

Members of the committee, however, include SK Engineering & Construction Company and the project's other major shareholders—Korea Western Power, Ratchaburi Electricity Generating Holding PCL of Thailand and the state-owned Lao Holding State Enterprise. All these participants will attempt to deflect attention from their own responsibility.

The Xepian-Xe Namnoy hydropower dam catastrophe is a result of unsafe construction methods and other cost-cutting procedures driven by the profit interests of all its investors, including the Laos government.



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