

Vietnam dam to cause hardship for ethnic minorities

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Some 103,000 people, mostly ethnic minorities, will be forcibly resettled if a proposed 3600 megawatt dam in northwestern Vietnam goes ahead. The US\$3.5 billion Son La Dam would be built on the Da River in the remote province of Son La, upstream from the country's largest hydropower project, the Soviet-built Hoa Binh Dam. If completed, the dam would inundate 440 square kilometers and would be Southeast Asia's highest at 192 meters.

The feasibility study, produced by Russian consultants and the state-owned Electricity of Vietnam, was submitted to the government on August 6. According to the government, construction is planned to start by early 2000 and electricity generation to begin by 2010. Funding for the dam has yet to be secured, although the Communist Party's Nhan Dan newspaper reported in September that 70 percent of loans for the project would come from foreign sources and 30 percent from Vietnam.

The project has been shunned by the World Bank and other multilateral bodies, apparently because of its impact on local people and the environment. The approximately 16,520 households to be resettled are of the Black Tai and other ethnic minority groups. Vietnam has 54 ethnic minorities who live mainly in poor rural areas. The disastrous consequences of unfair compensation and resettlement which followed the construction of Hoa Binh hydropower plant a decade ago have left officials wary of making the same mistakes. In that case, 130,000 Tai people were affected and 58,000 residents were relocated because vast areas were inundated by the reservoir.

The Tai Dam population was moved some distance from their homelands and provided with little compensation. As a result of the difficulties of establishing new lives in unfamiliar areas, together with conflicts over land and other resources between existing and new residents, about three-quarters of those who were resettled continue to live at or near the edge of the reservoir. These communities are facing extreme impoverishment, food shortages and greatly reduced levels of material well-being. The rapid clearing of the steep hillsides along most of the reservoir edge has resulted in deforestation and associated soil erosion, leading to accelerated siltation of the reservoir. The projected life

of Hoa Binh Dam has been reduced from more than 100 years to about 50 years as a result of the increased sedimentation of the reservoir. Many observers fear that a similar situation may occur at Son La.