Could the Mekong's water destabilise Asia?

April 26 2012

Millions of people across South-East Asia could be displaced if the hydro-electric dams on the Mekong River are built, says PhD candidate Chris Baker.

(Phys.org) -- South-East Asian nations surrounding the Lower Mekong Basin should put construction of hydro-electric dams on the Mekong River on hold if they want to avoid a human security disaster more reminiscent of sub-Saharan Africa than modern Asia, a University of Sydney PhD candidate researching the impact of hydro-electric development on the river says.

In a paper published by the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, Chris Baker calls for a holistic approach, assessing dams for their impact on the entire Mekong Basin rather than looking only at their effect on individual states.

The paper Dams, Power and Security in the Mekong says proliferation of dams could destroy the livelihoods of millions, devastate the

economies of Cambodia and Vietnam, and force many to migrate: "The social ramification of such migration is often resentment in the receiving communities against new arrivals. There is documented evidence of this exacerbating ethnic or political tensions leading to violent conflict."

"The forced relocation of hundreds of thousands in the Mekong Basin, similar to that witnessed with the removal of 1.4 million people during construction of the Three Gorges' Dam in China, is just the beginning," adds Baker, a student at the University's Centre for International Security Studies.

"In the longer term, the havoc wrought on fisheries and the impact on agriculture brought about by these dams is likely to create a food security catastrophe."

Baker assessed the impact of the Mekong's current and proposed hydro-electric dams on regional security and wants South-East Asian nations to heed a call for a 10-year moratorium on new dams.

Baker says the "hydropower gold-rush" sweeping the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) - running through Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam - is a serious threat to the peace and stability of the region. If continued unabated it raises the spectre of chaos like that of the Arab Spring.

His fieldwork took him around South-East Asia, most significantly to Central Laos where he witnessed first-hand the impacts of the Nam Thuen 2 dam. His paper also closely examines the controversial Xayaburi dam and the impact of 10 mainstream hydro-projects. Giving these dams the thumbs up will result in even more hydro-electric dams down the track putting the Mekong, its resources and its people under vast pressure.

The contentious Xayaburi dam, which has reportedly already begun

construction in secret, would block the Mekong with a 49m high, 830m long dam wall. Baker says the environmental impact assessment for the dam is extremely weak, looking at a distance of only 10km downstream. No assessment of bank erosion, downstream hydrology, migratory fish and sediment loads - which would impact fish, fertiliser and water quality - has been made.

"Once they start building on the lower mainstream there will be little to stop a 'tragedy of the commons', in which dams turn the Mekong into a reservoir up to 3000km long. If that happens millions of people will be affected."

Baker says, when measured against their electricity output, the cost of building the Lower Mekong mainstream dams is unduly high.

These dams would be "highly risky and experimental at best, reckless and irresponsible at worst," Baker observes in his paper. "The worst-case scenario could mean basin-wide losses of over a quarter of a trillion US dollars."

More information: www.rsis.edu.sg/nts/

Provided by University of Sydney