

Media Release by local people and MPs in Hsipaw township

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Hsipaw public gather to oppose Naypyidaw's new budget allocation for Upper Yeywa dam

About 1,000 local residents and MPs are gathering in Hsipaw today to oppose the damming of the Namtu/Myitnge river, and demand an immediate cancellation of the Upper Yeywa dam, whose ongoing construction budget was recently approved by the Naypyidaw parliament.

Some MPs are attending today's gathering at the Shan Literature and Culture Association Hall, including Sai Than Zin, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) MP for Hsipaw, who spoke out in the Lower House against the budget approval, raising concerns about the dam's environmental and social impacts on his constituency, and fears for the dam's stability – showing recent pictures of structural collapses at the dam site and flooding along the Namtu in Hsipaw.

Ignoring these concerns, on September 11, the parliament voted 501 in favor of the over three billion kyat (two million USD) budget, with only 28 against, including all twelve SNLD MPs in the Lower House.

Hsipaw residents are strongly opposed to the Upper Yeywa dam, which will submerge the entire village of Talong, with 653 inhabitants, 637 acres of orchards, 140 acres of rice fields, and countless hill-farms, as well as temples, pagodas, and schools. The dam was begun in 2008 by the former military regime, with locals only officially informed about the project in 2014.

"We strongly oppose the Upper Yeywa dam and are deeply disappointed in the parliamentary decision," said Nang Lao Kham, a Talong resident. "Central control over natural resources is a root cause of the ongoing conflict in Shan State. If the government continues exploiting resources in the ethnic states against local people's wishes, the conflict will never end."

On the day of the parliamentary vote, the Deputy Energy Minister, Dr. U Htun Naing argued strongly for the Upper Yeywa dam, citing national electricity needs, but not mentioning how it is part of the Energy Master Plan to build fifty new large dams, primarily for export of hydropower to neighbouring countries.

U Htun Naing also named European engineering companies involved in the Upper Yeywa dam, apparently to inspire confidence in its stability: Germany's Lahmeyer, Switzerland's Stuckey SA, and France's joint venture IPGRB. He failed to mention that Lahmeyer is a subsidiary of Tractebel ENGIE, the consulting engineer for the Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy dam which collapsed in Laos last July, killing hundreds and displacing thousands.

Foreign companies have so far ignored community opposition to damming the Namtu. Norway's state-owned SN Power is proceeding with plans to build the 700 megawatt Middle Yeywa dam in Nongkhio township. The International Finance Corporation is also promoting the Namtu/Myitnge basin as a "priority sub-basin for hydropower development" despite acknowledging "very high" conflict risks.

"We urge foreign countries to stop promoting and investing in dams in Burma's war zones. It is fuelling conflict, and undermining efforts to seek peace," said Nang San San Aye, Shan State MP for Hsipaw.

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