

Hydropower Dam Puts a Way of Life at Risk

BY [ZSOMBOR PETER](#) AND [KHUON NARIM](#) | FEBRUARY 28, 2015

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THMA BAING DISTRICT, Koh Kong province – In the heart of the Areng Valley, on the edges of the rolling Cardamom Mountains, an old Bodhi tree pierces the thick green canopy. At its base, nestled in between its hanging roots, sits a ramshackle altar of tin and timber for the spirit of the forest.

Like his Chong ancestors going back generations, Phun Chhong comes here every year in December or January to pray for a good harvest in the coming season. He comes here, too—with incense and fruit, a sacrificial chicken or pig’s head, and wine, always wine—if a relative falls sick to pray for their good health, or if one of his animals strays.

Phun Chhong stands near the altar of a spirit forest in Areng Valley last week. (Zsombor Peter/The Cambodia Daily)

“We pray for good luck,” Mr. Chhong said. “Or when we lose an animal, we come here to ask the spirit to find it, and we find it.”



The Chong—part of the Khmer Doeum, or “Original Khmer”—are one of the smallest and least understood indigenous minorities in the country. If the government allows the proposed Stung Cheay Areng dam to be built, the 1,200 Chong who call this place home fear losing a way of life they have carved out here over hundreds of years.

Along with their farms and cemeteries, and the habitat of a number of threatened or endangered animals, this spirit

forest and others like it in the valley would all be flooded by a 10,000-hectare reservoir and they would have to leave for higher ground.

“If the spirit forest floods, it will be like my own body is drowned,” said Has Porn, another Chong villager.

All but one of about a dozen Chong interviewed in the valley last week said they don’t want the dam. In a fiery speech on Tuesday in Phnom Penh, Prime Minister Hun Sen, who supports the project, accused dam opponents of wanting to secede and threatened to deploy rocket launchers to the Areng. But he assured critics that he would not green-light the Chinese-backed hydropower scheme any sooner than the next national elections in 2018 and said impact studies were ongoing.

But in the valley, many fear that the prime minister was merely postponing the inevitable.

Counting the Costs

Precious little is known about the Chong.

Last year, the head of the Culture Ministry’s culture department said he had never heard of the group. Another ministry official, and even the director of the province’s own culture department, said they had heard of them but had no idea if there were any left.

One Cambodian academic said the Chong have lived in the area for more than 400 years. Others said it was 500 or 600. Some of the Chong say it's been a millennium. They used to have their own language, and still speak a unique dialect of Khmer. How many are left is anyone's guess.

With their deep mistrust of non-conformists, the Khmer Rouge relocated the Chong to the nearby town of Chi Phat in the 1970s. Most moved back a few decades later as the last of the rebels—after the Khmer Rouge were overthrown in 1979—were driven out or bought off.

Alex Gonzalez-Davidson, a Spanish national who learned to speak fluent Khmer, co-founded the NGO Mother Nature to help the Chong fight the dam and came to work and live among them. [The government deported him](#) back to Spain on Monday after refusing to renew his visa over an illegal checkpoint the activists set up across the main road leading into the valley in hopes of keeping developers out.

“They call themselves Khmer Chong,” he said in an interview last year. “Here it is, ‘I am Khmer, but I am Khmer Chong.’”

“It would definitely be the end of their culture, and their livelihoods, too. This project would just completely flood this area,” he said of the proposed dam at the time.

“They would be forced to do what they have never done—to farm a fixed plot of land,” he added. “It would completely destroy their way of life.”

Like some other indigenous groups, but unlike most Khmer, the Chong are rotational farmers, cultivating a patch of land for a few years and leaving it fallow for several more as they move on to other fields, transitioning through at least a few more before circling back.

“If we move, it will be hard for us as minorities because we have lived here for a long time...and soon our way of life will be lost,” said Meach Penh, whose home and fields would all be washed away by the dam. “We don't know how to run a business like other Cambodians. We depend on the forest and we do rotational farming.”

The environmental fallout could be just as severe.

A joint impact assessment by the Forestry Administration and Conservation International a few years ago said the dam would wipe out one of the most biologically important areas in Cambodia and the region.

As the largest of only a few rivers not connected to the Mekong or its tributaries, the assessment said, “the Areng River has been found to harbor a unique fish fauna that does not occur anywhere else in Cambodia, including globally threatened and endemic species. Most of these species only occur in the upper reaches of the Areng River, so that habitat will be almost entirely lost if the Areng Valley dam is built.”

Of the 277 animal species in the area, it said, 31 are globally threatened and eight are officially protected by the Cambodian government.

“The upper Areng Valley is therefore one of the most important areas for biological conservation in Cambodia and indeed the Indo-Burma hotspot,” it added.

Among them is the critically endangered Siamese crocodile, whose image Mother Nature has made the symbol of its campaign against the dam.

According to the joint assessment, the upper valley is home to nearly a third of all the diminutive reptile's hatching sites in the world, “so the loss of this population would represent a global crisis for this species.”

The government's own map of the proposed project area, prepared by the consultancy firm SAWAC in 2008, shows the entire stretch of the Areng River that runs through the reservoir as a crocodile sanctuary, including at least three nests.

Roughly half the reservoir would also lie within the borders of the Central Cardamom Protected Forest.

The lower valley could be hit, too.

The joint assessment said the dam would significantly cut down on seasonal floods downriver that keep the area's fish stocks—and the 2,000-plus additional families who eat and make a living off of them—healthy.

The CPP government has repeatedly assured the dam's critics, who now include the opposition CNRP, that more impact assessments were in the works and that it was prepared to kill the project if the social and environmental costs were overwhelming.



But Mr. Hun Sen has already started playing down the likely damage and talking up the benefits, not only for the families that would have to move but the rest of the country.

Besides flooding their farms and forests, he said in a recent letter to one opposition lawmaker, the dam would have “no impact” on the culture and traditions of the Chong. On the other hand, he said the dam would bring in tax revenue and cut down on the country's greenhouse emissions by helping families switch from charcoal to hydropower. He said the Chong could find work building the dam and guiding newly attracted of ecotourists.

The Price of Progress

The project does have its supporters in the valley.

Thma Donpov commune chief Keo Sarun said most of the families in his village wanted to see the government build the dam “because they want the village to develop.”

“I have lived here since 1998 and it has never changed, so the people want electricity,” he said.

What electricity they get now comes from generators and a few solar panels. There are no clinics and the few schools

here go up only to the sixth grade. The entire valley is a giant dead zone for mobile reception. The only way to make calls in or out is by satellite phone.

Mr. Sarun said he had recently gone around with a letter asking any family that wanted SAWAC to come back for another impact assessment to add a thumbprint. Of the 100 families he asked, he said, all but five said yes.

“We do not force them; it's voluntary,” said the commune chief, who sat surrounded by paperwork on the floor of a breezy stilt house. “I am in the middle. I am not biased to any party because I am Khmer.”

Youm Na, who is not Chong and runs a convenience shop out of her house a few dozen meters from where the wall of the dam would rise, said she would rather not move, but prepared to hear what compensation the government would offer if she did. Like the commune chief, she said most of her neighbors were in favor of the dam.

“Most of the people in this village want the Chinese to come. They say we will have electricity, schools and hospitals if they come,” she said.

Ms. Penh, who lives in the same village, disagreed.

“When I talk to other Chong, they say they don’t want to move because we have everything here, and starting again is hard,” she said. “But they don’t dare to protest because they’re afraid the authorities will accuse them of being with the opposition.... They’re afraid the authorities will hate them.”

Ms. Penh said she has had soldiers criticize her for asking why the families weren’t consulted before previous visits from the companies behind the project, and heard local officials try to tarnish Mother Nature by accusing them of colluding with the CNRP.

She’s also heard officials promise to replace whatever the families lose if they have to move. Officially, the government says compensation and resettlement plans are still in the works.

“They say we will get what we had before, but I don’t believe them,” she said.

She has reason for worry.

Families displaced by plantations and infrastructure projects across the country have complained of paltry compensation and small or infertile plots of land at resettlement sites, leaving them worse off and deep in debt, even when an international partner like the Asian Development Bank is paying the bills.

Hoeng Pov, an active Mother Nature member who worked closely with Mr. Gonzalez-Davidson, said promises of fleeting construction jobs and cheap electricity somewhere outside of the valley were no compensation for what the Chong have inside of it.

“It’s like they have the money and want to pay us to destroy our own homes,” he said. “The government can give us jobs, but it can’t pay us for our culture and our forests.”

Mr. Pov was surrounded by a half-dozen fellow activists in the shade of a wood shack that serves as a base for their campaign against the dam. “Stop Natural Resource Destruction,” read a banner strung out across the back.

“If the government really cared, they can build the schools and clinics right here,” said Phal Chamroeun, a provincial monitor for the Community Legal Education Center, a legal aid NGO based in Phnom Penh.

It’s not even clear that the dam would work. The previous Chinese company that thought of building the Stung Cheay Areng dam pulled out after deciding that it would not be able to deliver on the planned 108 megawatts and would end up losing money. There has been no indication that Sinohydro Resources, the Chinese firm that has stepped in to take its place, has come to a different conclusion.

It has led to speculation that Sinohydro and the government have ulterior motives, that the firm perhaps even wants to mine the valley or log it for a quick profit and move on.

If the dam does get built, and delivers, it would be one of the smaller hydropower projects in the country.

The government is making a major push for hydropower to fuel its burgeoning economy, one of the fastest growing in the developing world. It sees the country’s riverine valleys as the batteries that will help lower some of the highest electricity costs in the region and lure investors.

According to a 2013 “Investing Guidebook” prepared by the Council for the Development of Cambodia, 12 of the 18 power projects under construction or consideration for completion by 2020

are hydroelectric dams. All together, the 18 projects would pump out some 6,320 MW of power, more than twice what the government projects it will need by then to meet the country's own needs.

At 108 MW, the Stung Cheay Areng—if it works— would represent roughly 1.7 percent of the 2020 target.

Deal or No Deal

Taking on the project's critics, Mr. Hun Sen on Tuesday insisted that the coming impact assessments would determine whether the dam gets built, and no sooner than 2018 in any case.

Yet many of the Chong in the valley feel that the project has unstoppable momentum.

Mr. Hun Sen has spoken out for it. Ruling party Senator Lao Meng Khin and his wife, together one of the most powerful couples in the country, are both listed as governors in Sinohydro's registration with the Commerce Ministry. Sinohydro signed a contract with a Chinese construction company for the dam last year and since then has taken the added step of registering the Stung Cheay Areng Hydroelectric Project with the ministry as well.

Villagers in the valley say local officials have also told them that the dam was a done deal.

"They say they have to build it because they already signed the documents with the company," said Ms. Na, the convenience shop owner. "I heard it from the commune chief. We went to the meeting and he came to tell us it will be built, if not this [government] mandate, then the next."

She said the meeting was in December.

"It sounds like the families will have to move," said Ms. Penh. "In the past they said the project will not happen. After that they said the dam will be built."

There was also Mr. Hun Sen's warning last week to send in rocket launchers if the families pushed too hard against the project. All the villagers interviewed in the valley last week, spare one commune chief, dismissed the prime minister's claims of secessionist plans as nonsense.

"We have nothing like that here," said Mr. Pov, the Mother Nature activist. "But I think [Mr. Hun Sen] believes what the local authorities tell him."

In 2012, the last time the prime minister accused a village of trying to break away from the state—a group of farmers in Kratie province protesting against a plantation owner they accused of stealing their farms—he did not send in rockets. He sent in a mixed force of more than 100 police and soldiers to raid the village early one morning.

A 14-year-old girl crouching in fear by her house was shot dead. Mr. Hun Sen quickly dismissed the fatal shooting as an unfortunate accident and ignored calls for an investigation.

In the Areng, the prime minister's talk of secession stems from the illegal roadblock Mother Nature set up across a route into the valley. Soldiers broke up the roadblock in September and have been manning a small camp at the site ever since. A young soldier washing dishes at the camp last week said they had no plans to pull out anytime soon.

Has Morn, the chief of Chumnap village, in Chumnap commune, said he and most of the other Chong in the valley still oppose the dam, afraid of what they would lose and having to start over from scratch.

"You can see my trees and jackfruit, they are very tall," he said. "If we move, we have to start over, and that's very hard."

Mr. Morn stepped out of his stilt home in a tattered CPP shirt to take a seat in the afternoon shade below. Rope and fishing nets were squeezed in between the floorboards and dangled overhead.

"If it's all flooded, we will lose our Chong culture," he said. "My great grandparents were born here, and their parents before them."

Like the others, he rejected claims of secessionist plans. But he still believed they had a chance to stop the dam.

“Only the people can stop it if they speak up,” he said. “We have a chance if we come together.”

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Correction: *A previous version of this article incorrectly stated that Keo Sarun, chief of Thma Donpov commune, is ethnic Chong. He is ethnic Khmer.*

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