

Thai-Burmese plan to dam two rivers

Activists raise alarm over environment, impact on minorities

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Thailand and Burma have agreed to make a joint study into the feasibility of a project to dam up two rivers they share for irrigation, Natural Resources and Environment Minister Praphat Panyachartrak said yesterday.

The planned dams would create reservoirs on Burmese soil where the Kok and Sai rivers originate and enter Thailand in the northern provinces of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai respectively.

Mr Praphat said the project would benefit thousands of square kilometres of farmland in both countries.

"There will be two core irrigation canals from the dams — one going to Burma and the other to Thailand," he said.

The agreement is set out contained in a memorandum of understanding on international water management, signed yesterday by Mr Praphat and Maj-Gen

Nyunt Tin, the Burmese agriculture minister.

Mr Praphat played down concerns the project could pose environmental threats and reduce water levels downstream. He said the proposed dams would be sited in degraded forests and their design would ensure little impact on river water levels.

A joint team would conduct a one-year feasibility study, which may include a plan to build hydro-electric dams, Mr Praphat said.

Other details would be discussed later.

Mr Praphat's assurances failed to convince environmental groups, which said the project would destroy forest areas and affect the Shan minority group living near the Kok river in Burma.

"Leaf-shedding trees may give the forests on the Burmese side the look of degradation, but they are in fact lush forests," said Chainarong Sretthachau, director of the Southeast Asia Rivers Network Thailand, responding to Mr Praphat's statement the dams would be built in degraded forests.

Environmental activist Nikom Putta, of the Chiang Mai-based Ping watershed management project, warned that soil

erosion would reduce the dams' water-retention capacity and their lifespan. Northern forest areas faced a problem of rapid soil erosion, causing sediment to accumulate in dams at a higher rate than at other dams.

"When forest areas are destroyed, the land's natural ability to hold water will also lessen," he said. Forests were known for helping keep 80% of rainwater underground before gradually releasing it outside the rainy season.

Politically, Mr Chainarong said, construction of the dams would have adverse impact on minority groups in Burma, and that would lead to international criticism of the two countries for human rights abuses.

He suspected the plan was one of power plant projects being supported by the Japanese Electric Power Development Company, which had pushed for construction of dams on rivers near the Thai and Burmese borders including the Kok, Kra, Moei, Sai and Salween.

"Mr Praphat must carefully consider the agreement because human rights and environmental groups worldwide will keep a close eye on this issue," Mr Chainarong said.