

Hydroelectric Dams and the Forgotten People of the Boloven Plateau

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2004

1) Introduction

Houay Ho Dam on the Boloven Plateau in Southern Laos was built by Korean company Daewoo and Thai company Loxley and completed in 1998. Since 1997, about 2500 ethnic Heuny and Jrou people from eleven villages who were living in the dam's watershed or reservoir areas, as well as areas on the Boloven Plateau that would be affected by the Xe Pian - Xe Nam Noy Dam, have been moved to resettlement sites in Pak Song District, and have been prevented from returning to their former lands. In addition, about 1300 other people in two villages, and part of another village, have been threatened with removal to make way for the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Project.

Since the completion of the Houay Ho Dam, at least two published reports have revealed that displaced people have been living in very poor conditions in resettlement sites where they are forced to remain despite a lack of arable land and fresh water supplies.¹ As these two reports are several years old, in early 2003 a local researcher went to the area to investigate the current situation being faced by these communities. The researcher also visited villages living downstream of the Houay Ho Dam near the Xe Kong River, to see whether these people have been affected by hydrological changes and other changes in land use patterns related to the Houay Ho Dam.

2) Background

Pak Song District, Champasak Province, encompasses much of the Boloven Plateau², a high mountainous area in the south of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos) that straddles the mainstream Mekong River to the west and the Xe Kong River, one of the largest tributaries of the Mekong, to the east. Reaching over 2000 metres above sea level in places, the climate of the plateau is unlike much of the rest of southern Laos. It receives much more rain, and is also subject to very cold temperatures in the winter, sometimes reaching below freezing at night. The plateau is rich in biodiversity, and supports a wide range of plants and wildlife. It is also a culturally affluent area, and is home to two Mon Khmer language-speaking groups of indigenous

¹ These include the publication '*Power Struggle: The Impacts of Hydro-Development in Laos*', which was produced by the International Rivers Network in 1999 (IRN, 1999), and the article '*More Trouble for the Heuny*', which appeared in the magazine *Indigenous Affairs*' in 2000 (Khamin, 2000).

² Lao people call the Boloven Plateau '*Phou Louang*'.

peoples who call themselves the Jrou and the Heuny.³ These two groups have historically inhabited areas on either side of the Xe Nam Noy River, the Jrou to the west, and the Heuny to the east (Khamin, 2000). Most of the people on the plateau are semi-subsistence-oriented farmers. However, the western part of the plateau has become well-known for cash crops, including cabbage and potatoes, and especially coffee

Since the 1980s, foreign consultants, companies and governments have shown considerable interest in building large hydroelectric dams on or near the Boloven Plateau in southern Laos. In 1994, South Korean multinational Daewoo International Corporation, together with the Thai company Loxley Public Company, signed a Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) agreement with the Lao government to build the 150 MW Houay Ho Hydroelectric Project, operate it for a 25-year concession period, and then hand the dam over to the Lao government. Construction began late that same year, and by 1997 the reservoir began filling up. By September 1999 most of the power generated by the dam was being exported to Thailand (IRN, 1999).

The Houay Ho Project involves damming a relatively small stream on the Boloven Plateau, and creating a large reservoir about 32 km₂. The water from the reservoir is then diverted down the plateau's steep escarpment to the project's power station for generating electricity. The water is subsequently discharged into a natural stream in the lowlands in Attapeu Province, before flowing into the Xe Kong River. The Houay Ho Dam was constructed with little planning, and few measures designed to protect the environment and ensure that local people would not suffer as a result of the project (IRN, 1999; Khamin, 2000).

In 1996, during the time that the Houay Ho Dam was under construction, another large South Korean multinational, Dong Ah Construction Industries Company, entered into an agreement with the Lao government to construct and operate the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam. This dam was envisioned to be much larger than Houay Ho, with an electricity generating capacity of 438 MW, and costing over US\$ 1 billion. The project was expected to be complicated and require multiple dams and stream diversions⁴. The dam was expected to seriously alter the hydrology of some of the most important rivers running off of the plateau, and fisheries consultants hired as part of the project's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) recommended, because of the very serious downstream impacts expected, that the Xe Pian River not be dammed (Roberts and Baird, 1995). However, this recommendation did not make it into the final EIA prepared by Swiss consulting firm Electrowatt Engineering Company (Lang, 2003).

Not long after Dong Ah began building roads and preparing to construct the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam, the Asian Economic Crisis set in. Embattled financially at home,

³ The Lao call them the Laven and the Nya Heun.

⁴ The Houay Makchan stream would be diverted into the Xe Pian River, which would then be dammed. The water from there, together with the flow from Houay Liang stream, would then be diverted into the Xe Nam Noy River where a 78 metre high dam would be built, creating a 30 km₂ reservoir. The water from the reservoir would then be diverted through a 13 km canal and down the escarpment of the Boloven Plateau to its power station in Attapeu Province. The water would then travel in the natural stream, Houay Pouk, to the Xe Kong River.

in 1999, Dong Ah decided to withdraw all their heavy equipment from the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam area, and had closed all their project offices in Laos, with no indication of ever returning to Laos.

Meanwhile, the Houay Ho's owners, Daewoo and Loxley, found themselves emerging from the economic crisis seriously weakened, indebted, and overextended, and both companies soon attempted to liquidate much of their overseas assets, including the Houay Ho Dam. After considerable negotiations, Daewoo and Loxley succeeded in selling all of their shares in Houay Ho in January 2002 to the Belgium Company Tractebel Electricity and Gas International, together with an unnamed Thai partner. They acquired an 80% stake of the equity in Houay Ho, including 20% being held by Tractebel's Thai unit (Jung-won, 2001), and 100% of the debt, with the 20% remaining equity remaining with the Lao government (Tractebel, 2001). The acquisition price was reported to be USD 140 million. A syndicate of Thai banks provided financing, and the Belgian Export Credit Agency, ONDD, provided 'political coverage' in support of Tractebel (KPL, 2003a). Dirk Beeuwsaert, CEO of Tractebel's international energy division stated, at the time of the acquisition, that, "This project is a key element in Tractebel's growth strategy in Thailand" (Tractebel, 2001; Financial Times, 2001).

This report aims at providing updated information about the situation on the Boloven Plateau and in parts of Attapeu Province's Samakhixay District with regard to the socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts of the Houay Ho and Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dams. This report is particularly timely for two reasons. Firstly, the Houay Ho Dam continues to be operational, and local people impacted by the project continue to suffer, despite the fact that the dam has a new owner and backing from the Belgium government. Secondly, it has recently been announced that a Vietnamese consortium, called the Vietnam Laos Investment and Development Company, which includes the Vietnamese government-owned utility, Electricity of Vietnam (EVN), plans to invest US\$ 1 billion to construct five large dams in the Xe Kong River basin, the largest being the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam, which is expected to have the capacity to generate 340 MW of power⁵. The consortium reported its plans to seek soft loans from the Vietnamese government to finance the investment, but financing details remain sketchy (Reuters, 2003).

In apparent contradiction to the above report, on October 23, 2003, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Lao government and the Korea and Laos Power Development Company, Ltd, to facilitate a joint feasibility study on the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam. The Lao news service, Khao San Pathet Lao, reported that if the study goes well, the Korean company would invest US\$ 600 million to construct the dam, which was reported to have an expected capacity of 365 MW. It was reported that the dam would be built according to a 30-year BOT agreement, and that most of the power would be exported to Viet Nam (KPL, 2003b).

⁵ Initially Dong Ah expected the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam project would have the capacity to generate 438 MW, but the plan has apparently been scaled down.

3) Methodology

This report is based primarily on fieldwork conducted by the author, an ethnic Jrou man from southern Laos, in February 2003. He organised detailed individual and group discussions with various ethnic Heuny, Jrou and Lao people who had either been forcibly resettled as a result of the Houay Ho or Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dams, are threatened with forced resettlement if the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam proceeds, or are living downstream from the Houay Ho Dam. Areas along the Xe Nam Noy and Xe Pian Rivers that will be impacted if the second dam is built were not visited, as the emphasis of the study was on looking at impacts that have already occurred. Interviews were conducted in Jrou, Heuny and Lao languages, without translation, as the researcher is from the local area. An ethnic Heuny man with detailed knowledge of the villages visited in Pak Song District assisted the principal researcher. The report, originally written in Lao, was then translated into English.

4) Results

4.1) Houay Kong resettlement area

The Houay Kong resettlement area, called 'Ban Chat San' in Lao, is situated near Houay Kong village, and is the largest of three resettlement areas associated with the Houay Ho and Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dams. It was the site where the first group of people relocated in the name of the Houay Ho and Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dams were moved. Their former villages were either located in the reservoir or watershed areas for the dams. Resettlement of people into the area began in January 1997.

The names of the eight villages whose inhabitants were relocated into this area are:

1. Ban Xe Nam Noy (Heuny)
2. Ban Nam Leng (Heuny)
3. Ban Keo Khoun Muang (Heuny)
4. Ban Don Khong (Heuny and a few Jrou)
5. Ban Latsasin (Heuny)
6. Ban Nam Hane (Heuny)
7. Ban Nam Tieng (Heuny)
8. Ban Thong Nyao (Heuny)

The people from these eight villages include people from different ethnic groups, including Jrou, and a few Lao. However, the vast majority of the inhabitants of the area are ethnic Heuny. The eight villages encompass a total of 475 households with a population of 1752 people, of which 849 are females.

The living conditions of the people at the Houay Kong resettlement area site

When the Houay Kong ‘Ban Chat San’ was visited in February 2003, a number of ethnic Heuny villagers reported that their living conditions had declined since being relocated. The following statement by a Heuny man from Thong Nyao village is indicative of the situation there:

My relatives and I don’t want to live in the resettlement village but we were forced to and we could not protest. We miss our native lands where we used to live for hundreds of years, our crops, vegetables and our happy lives.

In the resettlement area it is easier to communicate and travel to urban centres, and hospitals and schools are easier to access. However, there are various serious problems with both services, and overall, local people still face considerable health and education problems. For example, even though there is a school for grades 1 to 5 in the resettlement village, there are not enough classrooms for the students. Tables, benches and blackboards are not available and the students have to sit on mats. There is no medicine available at the health centre, either for free or to buy, and since there is no medicine, there are no health workers stationed there anymore. In essence, the health centre has stopped functioning; so sick people must travel long distances to the district centre for medical treatment.

There are also serious problems with accessing clean water, land for agriculture and areas where natural forest and aquatic non-timber forest products (NTFPs) can be harvested.

In addition, local people claim that the higher government authorities have not compensated the people sufficiently according to their promises. When relocation first took place, relocatees together received 100 tons of rice as a grant for three years, but it was not enough to compensate them for their losses or meet their basic needs. In 2002, in recognition of the serious food security problems facing the people, the inhabitants of the eight villages in the resettlement area received another 21 tons of rice as a ‘revolving fund’, in which they are allowed to borrow rice but have to pay it back. They are charged lower rates than what private traders charge. However, the people are not happy with this system, as they don’t know where they will get the rice to pay back the rice that they borrow.

Land for cultivation

The most serious problem facing people in this resettlement area is that there is only a very limited amount of land in the area for agriculture, and the land that is available is mainly unusable since weeds grow everywhere. If the authorities provided technical knowledge and funding for plowing the land, locals believe that it might be possible to grow crops, but it is very difficult for local people to successfully farm the

land as it is now. Each family has less than two hectares of land, and many have much less than that.

At least fifty percent of the people in the resettlement area reportedly want to return to their native lands, or near them, especially the elders who miss their old, fertile lands. However, the government refuses to allow them to leave the resettlement area. They miss the large fruit trees growing in their native lands. In the new villages, they no longer coexist with nature like they used to. They report that their traditions are decaying day by day because the people have become scattered in order to sell their labour to survive. They do not have opportunities to live in their former villages. They finally end up living day to day, with not much food to eat.

I miss my former village and I want to return to it because I used to live there for a long time. I've left behind the trees that I used to collect fruits from every year. I miss them a lot. Whenever I think of them I cry a great deal. Here in the resettlement village, we cannot eat any fruits because they are stolen before they are ripe.

An old woman in the resettlement village, unit 8, February 7, 2003.

Water scarcity is another problem. There is a water gravity supply for the resettlement area, but it is now broken and cannot be used. There were nine wells drilled, but only two now work, and there is not a sufficient supply of water for the people.

Difficulties faced by the people who are from different villages

Since people from many villages live together, there are many social problems due to the different cultures. In addition, many do not have enough to eat, so they steal small things like chickens, metal roofing sheets, and agricultural products. One extreme example involved some young people in the resettlement area who stole a motorbike and sold it in Attapeu Province. The police finally arrested them. The ethnic people feel humiliated, which has led to social decay and many disputes and quarrels. The villagers do not trust their neighbours anymore.

Socio-cultural factors

Many Heuny families in the resettlement villages have changed their cultural practices. Previously, after the birth of a child, social gatherings were prohibited until traditional post partum practices were completed. Only the father and mother of the child were allowed to be together with it, but some people have now abandoned this practice since they began to live in the resettlement area.

Hopes of the villagers for the future

The following are the hopes of the villagers in the resettlement area for the future:

- 1) The villagers want to have enough paddy fields for growing rice, including instructions from technical personnel on how to farm paddy fields.
- 2) The villagers want the government authorities to train them in agriculture, including livestock and fish raising.
- 3) The villagers want the authorities to build more schools with tables, benches, and teachers, and also drill wells to provide the people with adequate access to clean water.
- 4) The villagers want the authorities to visit them and help them to solve the people's problems of food shortages, and other problems that they have encountered as well.

Relocation to the Houay Kong area has caused serious difficulties for the people who have been displaced. The government made a big mistake in not conducting a detailed study of the negative impacts of displacement on the people and the environment before resettling them. Thousands of people have been relocated and are isolated from their native lands. Furthermore, the authorities have not taken any responsibility for the livelihoods of the villagers who have been moved out of their former villages, and so the people are faced with many serious problems.

4.2) Leuk Seua village resettlement area

This resettlement area is in Pak Song District two kilometers from the Xe Nam Noy River next to the road from Pak Song District centre to Attapeu Province. Forty-seven families from Leuk Seua village started to move to the resettlement village in August 2002. It was previously located in the watershed area for the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam. This village now has a population of 247 people, of which 117 are females. Twenty other families originally from Leuk Seua village have not been resettled because the roofs of some of their houses in the resettlement area have not yet been completed. All the people in this area are ethnic Heuny people.

Living conditions of the villagers of Leuk Seua village after being moved to the resettlement area

The villagers face many difficulties, especially a shortage of food, including rice and water for drinking and domestic uses. The authorities said that the people would be provided with electricity and enough houses if they moved to the resettlement area, but the people now believe that they were lied to. At the beginning, each family was provided 30 kilograms of rice. A month later, they received rice as a revolving fund. The villagers have to buy the rice, and the money collected is supposed to be used for buying more rice. If someone pays back their debt with rice, it is used for selling to other families in need. This means that the assistance that they have received is not in the form of a grant.

The villagers state that in a year they are sufficient in rice for only 5 months. For the remaining months, they have to gather NTFPs and sell them. Many families have to sell their labour to survive, and some feel ashamed to do so because they have never done

it before. In their former villages, they never had shortages of rice or clean water. Now the people feel that they have no alternatives to make their living.

In the resettlement village, their traditions are being abandoned because the villagers do not stay together, as they have to be scattered to make a living.

Drinking water

The villagers have three drilled wells, but now only one is workable - the other two are broken down. Initially 6 wells were planned, but only three were drilled.

The authorities do not appear to be interested in fixing the broken wells. The village headmen have made a request to the district government to repair them, but the authorities have ignored them. Therefore, the villagers face difficulties in accessing clean water. Carrying water from the stream is difficult, as it is very far away. The people do not have any vehicles to transport the water to their houses. They have to rely on only one well, which dries up at the height of the dry season. Therefore, from March to May the villagers do not have any access to clean water near where they live, and for the rest of the year only limited access. The people believe that the authorities are not paying attention to trying to help the villagers in the resettlement area.

When we lived in our former village, we never faced shortages of water because our village was located near a stream with clean water, and catching fish was very easy. In the resettlement village we face many difficulties.

A man from Leuk Seua resettlement area, February 3, 2003.

Land for cultivation

According to the statistics provided by the village headman, the Leuk Seua resettlement village officially has 1239 hectares of land for farming, but only 110 hectares are actually suitable for cultivation. The remaining area is rough and rocky with plenty of holes. The land is not fertile and the crops do not grow as well as in their former village. The people do not have enough land for cultivation. Some villagers secretly clear land for agriculture near their former village. However, they believe that if they are caught doing so, they will be arrested, punished and fined, since the area where they live has now been designated as a district protected area.

The villagers are losing hope and do not trust the authorities. Since they were relocated, the government officials have never visited them, given them encouragement, or helped them find solutions to the problems that they are facing in terms of their living conditions.

I'd better return to my former village because here nothing has improved. The officials have never visited us. They treat us like people who do not have any relatives.

Old man from Leuk Seua village, February 6, 2003.

Demands of the villagers to the government authorities

The following are the demands of resettled people from Leuk Seua village to the higher government authorities:

- 1) The villagers want the authorities to repair the broken wells and drill 3 more wells, in order to fulfill the promises made before the people were relocated.
- 2) The villagers want the authorities to visit them and find some options for the people to develop themselves. A sufficient amount of fertile and arable land should be allocated to the villagers.
- 3) The villagers want to have a community centre built so that they are able to organise social gatherings.
- 4) The school in the resettlement area needs more tables, benches, blackboards and other learning materials. Presently there are no blackboards and the teachers have to write on pieces of wood. There are not enough classrooms for the students. Many students have dropped out of school due to poverty.
- 5) The villagers want to be sent back to their former village.
- 6) The villagers want to be trained by government technical staff in raising livestock, cultivating fast-growing crops, and raising fish in ponds. They need assistance and funding to access land for paddy rice farming.
- 7) The villagers want international organisations to assist them in solving the various problems that they are facing, especially in terms of water supply, school facilities and agriculture.
- 8) The villagers want the government authorities to build a village health dispensary because when people get sick, they do not have any vehicles to transport them to the hospital. They have no medicine and no money to buy it. The main diseases in the area are diarrhea and malaria.

4.3) Houay Soy and Nam Kong resettlement area

This resettlement site is located on the Boloven Plateau on the east side of Pak Song District near Thong Vay village. The villagers of Houay Soy and Ban Nam Kong villages were relocated to the area on March 27, 1999. Nam Kong village has 82 households with a population of 287, of which 174 are females. Houay Soy village has 101 households with a population of 308, of which 190 are females. All the people in both villages are ethnic Heuny.

Living conditions in the resettlement area

In the former villages it was easy to catch fish and there were plenty of NTFPs and arable land. The villagers had enough land for cultivation. After moving to the resettlement area, their livelihoods have become much worse than they were in their former villages.

The people have a shortage of water. Nam Kong and Houay Soy villages have two drilled wells, but neither of them work anymore. They have to collect water from a stream, but it is not clean, and is muddy, as buffaloes and cows bathe in the upper part of the stream. In addition, locals have difficulties getting water since the stream is far away from their houses, and sometimes the stream dries up. Together, these problems represent severe obstacles for the people to get clean drinking water. Everyday the villagers have to stand in a queue, waiting for more than one hour to get water from the stream. If they collect water quickly, it becomes muddy.

The headmen of these two villages have already approached the relevant district government authorities for help, particularly asking them to drill more wells. The officials promised to come and examine the situation, but have not showed up yet. The villagers only wait and wait. The authorities have never visited them since they were relocated.

We want to return to our former village. Over there we have plenty of fruits. The water from the stream is cool and clean, and catching fish is very easy.

Woman from Houay Soy village, February 6, 2003.

School and health care

The two villages have one 8 x 16 m school, and grade one to five classes are taught. There are two teachers and not enough classrooms to house the increasing number of students. There is also a lack of tables and benches. There is no health clinic. When the people get sick, they have to rely upon themselves. The predominant diseases are diarrhea, malaria and other fevers.

Land for cultivation

Nam Kong village has 1572 hectares of land but only 147 hectares are arable. Houay Soy village has 1787 hectares, of which only 160 hectares can be cultivated. The remaining land is rocky and tough, and sometimes land that was allocated to them is the fallow land of other villages, so the newcomers cannot use it. Government officials have also taken some land for oil palm and eucalyptus plantations. Each family has an average of just one hectare of land, which is insufficient to sustain them. Sometimes there are disputes over the land belonging to the neighbouring villages, because there are no clear land demarcations.

Some families do not have enough land for practicing shifting cultivation, and the land that they do have is not fertile. Facing difficult circumstances, some families regularly return to their former villages to practice shifting cultivation or grow vegetable gardens. They stay near their old villages for 3-4 months, or even up to one year at a time without going back to the resettlement villages.

Whenever the village committees want to hold a formal meeting, they cannot assemble the villagers because many have gone to the forest for hunting and collecting NTFPs. The people do not listen to the government authorities anymore. They were told that in the resettlement villages they would be provided with all the facilities that they would need, but so far nothing has happened, which has made the people unhappy.

Shortages of rice

The people from both Houay Soy and Nam Kong villages have been compensated with rice but not sufficiently, or according to the promises made by the authorities. Prior to being resettled, the people were told that they would receive 50 tons of rice, but in reality they have received only 17 tons of rice over the last three years. Each family has received an average of about 100 kgs of rice per year, which is sufficient supply for only three months. When they lived in their former villages, they were self-sufficient in rice all year round. Consequently, the villagers have to sell their labour to get money to buy rice. Some work for the sawmills, and others look for whatever odd jobs are available. Most villagers have to be self-reliant, as the government has not provided sufficient support for them.

The demands by the villagers to the authorities

The following are the demands of the villages to the government authorities:

- 1) The villagers want to be trained in growing different crops, and be provided with funds and seed varieties to support their agricultural activities after being trained. They want to be assisted in terms of their social welfare because they have no alternatives for their livelihoods.
- 2) They want to have a community health clinic built, and they want the school expanded. They need more learning materials for the school.
- 3) They call for the government authorities to allow them to return to their former villages.

4.4) Nong Phanouane village

The livelihoods of the Jrou people in Nong Phanouane

Nong Phanouane is a village found in the southern part of Pak Song District, south of where the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam is planned, in the watershed area that the dam planners want to protect so that the dam's reservoir does not become filled with sediment. The village is about six km from the Xe Pian River and is almost entirely populated by ethnic Jrou people. The village has 122 households with a total population of 591 people, of which 251 are females. Their main occupation is shifting cultivation. The people also grow coffee, hunt, and collect NTFPs to generate supplementary income. Due to the fertility of the land and the abundance of natural resources in the area, the villagers of Nong Phanouane are sufficient in rice, and have continued to live in the area for hundreds of years. They make between 2 and 4 million kip (US\$200-400) per family

per year selling coffee. Consequently, the villagers of Nong Phanouane live a relatively prosperous life. Each family has a large house with galvanized iron sheet roofing and wooden walls.

Socio-cultural factors

The people of Nong Phanouane village have long believed in Animism, which is the religion belonging to their ethnic group. Every year, they celebrate by conducting ceremonies, eating buffaloes, and drinking rice alcohol from jars. Neighbouring villagers are always invited to take part in this yearly celebration, as it indicates solidarity amongst the indigenous peoples of the plateau. Whenever a person in a poor family passes away, other families provide the family of the deceased person with a basket of rice. This indicates that the Jrou people have long-established and strong traditions of solidarity, which have been handed down for generations.

The spiritual fall of the Jrou people since plans to build dams were made

In 2000, government officials told Nong Phanouane and Houay Chote villagers (see section 3.5 for information about Houay Chote) to prepare themselves to move to new resettlement areas, since both village areas would be included in a watershed protection area for the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam. But up to now nothing has happened. The villagers continue to wait to be relocated, and have lost confidence in the government authorities because the situation is not clear and the people do not want to be resettled. One Jrou villager from Nong Phanouane village made the following statement:

We are told that if we move to the resettlement village, we'll be provided with all kinds of facilities: water and electricity. Life will be better than in our former village. But when we visit our relatives who have already moved to resettlement areas [as part of plans to build the Houay Ho and Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dams], all of them complain and want to return to their homelands because in the resettlement areas they have not received the benefits that the authorities promised. We therefore do not want to move to the resettlement areas.

Now, due to the uncertainty about relocation, life is insecure for the people of Nong Phanouane. In addition, the people have been told by government authorities to stop practicing shifting cultivation. Some of them have become crazy due to fears that they will lose their many productive coffee gardens, fruit trees and houses. The authorities have not conducted any detailed study of the losses that people will face if they are displaced. The people do not want to work on their gardens nor improve their houses, as they fear being moved to other places. As a result, they do not trust the authorities anymore.

In the past they trusted the authorities and that is the a reason why many men voluntarily served the nation as revolutionary soldiers, while the women delivered food to the revolutionary soldiers. Today, the authorities do not seem to recognise the

contribution of the people to the revolution. Instead, they threaten them, and treat them like orphans.

The ethnic people have traditions for taking care of the sacred places where they make offerings to the spirits of their ancestors. If they are told to leave their homelands, they will not be able to continue these traditions. This worries the people a lot.

The Nong Phanouane villagers have decided that if they are told to move to the resettlement areas, they will not destroy their houses as other villagers did when they were moved. They will live in the resettlement areas for 4-5 months. If they do not receive the things promised by the government, they will leave the resettlement areas and return home. If they are killed for returning, they will be ready to be killed in their own homes.

They have decided to do this because they have seen the experiences of those villagers who have already been displaced. Those villagers now want to go back to their old villages, but they have no houses in those areas anymore. This indicates that the people will not easily forget the lies told by the authorities.

4.5) Houay Chote village

The livelihoods of the Heuny People in Houay Chote village

Houay Chote is two km from Nong Phanouane village and about four km from the Xe Pian River. Like the people of Nong Phanouane, the people of Houay Chote village are also waiting to be relocated, but would rather not move at all. Houay Chote has 125 households with a total population of 599 people, of which 250 are females. Their livelihoods are similar to those of the people of Nong Phanouane: they practice shifting cultivation; gather NTFPs and hunt. However, they grow little coffee. The people of Houay Chote village do not want to move to the resettlement areas. They claim that many people from their ethnic group have been forced to move already but that their living conditions have gotten worse. Now, they are the only ethnic Heuny village remaining in the area. In their current village, there are many places for making upland fields and gardens. Therefore, the people have no idea why the higher authorities want to move them, although they have been told that the area needs to be protected to make way for dams. One old Heuny man from Houay Chote made the following statement:

I do not want to move to the resettlement area because my grandchildren, who have already lived here, will want to come back to their former village. I've cultivated this land since I was a young boy, and now I am an old man, so I cannot abandon it. I want to die here.

Old man from Houay Chote village, February 5, 2003.

Now the Houay Chote villagers are being told to prepare themselves to move out and join Leuk Sua village in one of the resettlement areas. A Houay Chote man made

the following statement to a member of the Pak Song District Lao Women's Union when she visited the village.

Why do the party and the government want to build up the national economy by the construction of dams? The local authorities together with the loggers cut down the trees in the protected areas and nobody dares to say a word. But when we cut down the trees in our upland fields, they take them away saying that they belong to the state. Where's justice? Listening to radio news from other countries, we know that other countries build dams for agricultural purposes. Investors from other countries only bring in foreign investments in order to pay low taxes and provide jobs to their own people.

Houay Chote villager, February 5, 2003.

The authorities have not prepared any detailed plans of action to help the relocated people and the villagers have not been given adequate information. They want to know when the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam is scheduled to be built, and when the villagers will be resettled. They have only been told to wait and wait. Most people are worried about their future and some of them want to flee deep into the forest, hoping to find a place where they can live in peace and with freedom.

4.6 Impacts on the Heuny people as a whole

The Heuny ethnic group is disintegrating. In the past the Heuny were a close community, and would go hunting and collecting wild vegetables together. There was a feeling of solidarity and unity. Some people pounded rice while young men and women courted under the full moon, indicating solidarity amongst the indigenous peoples.

When the Houay Ho Dam was built, nearby villages were relocated to different places, gradually lessening their close relations. The ethnic unity has broken down. For instance, in the past the Houay Chote villagers would look for food together with the Nam Leng villagers living nearby, but after the people from Nam Leng were moved to the Houay Kong resettlement area, the people from these two villages rarely meet.

“If the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam is ever built, its construction will result in the terrible decay of the natural resources and environment, as well as the livelihoods of local people, be it in Nong Phanouane or Houay Chote villages. The country will generate some income, but there will be big losses due to the destruction of nature and the disintegration of the indigenous groups that have long lived in the mountains. If the government continues to build dams to generate revenue as a main source of national income, it will cause misery to the people who have no alternatives.”

Young ethnic Jrou man, February 2003

4.7) Impacts on the villagers downstream of Houay Ho Dam

Khoum Kham village, Samakhixay District, Attapeu Province

The villagers from Khoum Kham village, now with 48 families, are mainly ethnic Heuny, with some ethnic Lao residents. They have been negatively affected by water flowing downstream from the Houay Ho powerhouse to the confluence with the Xe Kong River. The problem is especially serious in the rainy season, causing flood damage to paddy fields along the riverbanks and drowning livestock. 178 hectares of paddy farmland has been regularly damaged since the dam was built, but the villagers have not received any compensation for their losses.

Soke village, Samakhixay District, Attapeu Province

This village of 237 families is adjacent to the Xe Kong River, and is mainly populated by ethnic Soke people, a sub-group of Oy, and also some Lao and some ethnic Kriang⁶ originally from Xe Kong Province. In the past, the villagers from Soke village had 187 hectares of land, but now they have only 105 hectares. Some of their lands were taken to make a protected area associated with the dam and the people were not compensated. Some people have also had their paddy fields; gardens and livestock flooded by releases from the power station during the rainy season and have not been compensated for their losses.

Other impacts

Mixay village, now with 43 families and Khoum Kham village (already mentioned above) have also been affected by the project in other ways. Villagers have been prohibited from doing agriculture near the dam's powerhouse because this area has been designated as a protected area. Khoum Kham village also had to be relocated about one kilometer because the village was in the path of the tailrace canal. Some of the people from these two villages have left the area, since they cannot farm there. They received no compensation for their losses and many now live with relatives in other villages.

The people of Lak 52 village also lost half of their land to the protected area, and now do not have enough land for cultivation. The village is multi-ethnic, and includes some Oy, Kriang and Lao people. Nam Hane village, an ethnic Heuny village, has also lost most of its swidden agriculture land to the protected area, and except for a small number of families with lowland paddy land, most of the people from the community have moved away to other villages where they have relatives.

⁶ The Kriang are called 'Nye' by the Lao.

4.8) Problems associated with the operation of the Houay Ho Dam

Since construction of the Houay Ho Dam was completed, the dam has experienced some technical problems that have affected power generation. The Lao language daily newspaper, *Pathet Lao*, reported in early 2002 that the dam was “running into problems”. According to the paper, “the electricity generators have been incapacitated by land erosion at the power house, and power lines are also threatened.” It was reported that US\$ 50,000 had already been spent to buy new materials to repair the power lines, and that the dam would be repaired before the next rainy season. Power generation had to be stopped while the tunnel was repaired. Local government officials have also reported that the reservoir is leaking in certain places, resulting in electricity production being much less than anticipated, although the exact amount of the loss is not clear. Also, it has been rumoured that the expected life of the dam is now much less than originally predicted – maybe only thirty-five years. Local Lao officials report that the investors and project developers are very concerned about these problems

5) Conclusions

From the above findings and observations, it is clear that the livelihoods and traditions of the ethnic people of the Bolovens Plateau have been severely affected by the Houay Ho and the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dams.

The people in the resettlement villages have deteriorated, both mentally and physically, as the government authorities, who apparently do not feel any pity for them, have neglected them.

Water shortages, a lack of land for cultivation, food insecurity, and economic instability are serious problems facing the displaced communities. These problems need to be urgently addressed. The people from the two villages that have not yet been relocated are very anxious, as they fear that they will face the same problems as those who have already been relocated, and do not want to leave their homes and their fertile lands. Other villages living downstream of the powerhouse have also been negatively impacted by the construction and operation of the Houay Ho Dam. Undoubtedly, the construction of the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy Dam will cause further impacts to the environment and people of the area, although these impacts are not detailed in this report (Roberts and Baird, 1995; Khammin, 2000; Lang, 2003).

The Lao government apparently only sees the benefits from the construction of dams, in terms of generating electricity for sale to its neighbouring countries, and does not try to learn the lessons from the past failures of dams, both in Laos and in other countries. Dam construction and planning has resulted in severe social, environmental and economic impacts. The situation is especially serious for the local people who have been moved away from their ancestral lands, but the situation is also serious for those scheduled for relocation, and for those impacted by other problems related to the dams. They are very upset that up until now they are the forgotten people of the Boloven Plateau.

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