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Activists say they will step up work to protect the Irrawaddy River

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New Delhi (Mizzima) – In response to Burmese No. 1 Power Ministry Minister Zaw Min’s statement that the Myitsone Dam project will proceed as planned, activists say they will step up their protest campaigns against the hydropower project.

At a press conference in Naypyitaw, minister Zaw Min said there would be no turning back on the Myitsone hydropower project.



The area around which the Myitsone Dam will be built on the Irrawaddy River. Photo: Seng Aung

“If they go ahead with this project, we need to be united. Those who love the Irrawaddy River must work for our rights. We must do this even though no one has given this responsibility to us. If this stage is not enough, we must switch to the next stage,” Maung Sein Ni, the editor of Padauk Pwintthit magazine, told Mizzima. Observes said that the next stage could include public gatherings or demonstrations.

Minister Zaw Min told the media: “Some people are suffering from the currently popular ‘Irrawaddy disease,’ and people who are trying to catch up with this popular issue, and some cartoonists, have asked if we would go ahead with the Myitsone hydropower project. We will go ahead with this Irrawaddy Myitsone dam project. We will never backtrack from this project.”

The minister’s response comes as many international academics and other professionals have urged the government to suspend the dam project in order to conduct more research on the ecological impact.

“I think they have done much and can not turn back at this stage. So I say we must push them to move, if they don’t listen to the voices raised by academics and other professionals,” said Maung Sein Ni.

“Save the Irrawaddy” campaigner Myo Yan Naung Thein told Mizzima the decision needs to

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reflect public opinion, because the Myitsone Dam project is so important for the future of the Irrawaddy River.

"A minister or a government cannot decide and work on this dam project [alone]. They need to consider public opinion. We shall continue our campaign. If we lose our cause this time, this will be an irreparable loss and we will never get back our Irrawaddy River. The government said that it would not backtrack on this project and so do we," he said.

The Electrical Power minister said Burma would sell the power generated from the dam to China, because Burma could not use even the 1,500 megawatts of power that it currently generates.

"This is blatant lie. Can Rangoon get round-the-clock power now? Monyin Township in Kachin State is in blackout round the clock. It is ridiculous to say there is a surplus in electrical power while many cities and towns elsewhere in the country are in blackout," Myo Yan Naung Thein said.

Activists have protested against the project from an environmental and ecological impact viewpoint.

The minister said: "Spoiling this project in the pretext of environmental issues will undermine the interest of our country. We can achieve nothing from this. It's very simple. The country will get 10 per cent free power and 8 per cent commercial tax from this project. We must consider what to do, either for the interest of a 50 to 60 million population or otherwise."

Myo Yan Naung Thein said that referring to the proceeds of power sales to China as a national interest was wrong.

"The survival of the Irrawaddy River forever is in our national interest. The sale of power to a foreign country is not in the national interest. This is in the interest of China, otherwise it must be in the interest of a handful of rulers and businessmen," he said.

Veteran journalist Ludu Sein Win warned that if the government failed to consider what many people were calling for in a civilized way, some people were likely to take their protests into the streets to raise their demands.

"The people who continue the project must take all the responsibility for that. The protesters will not have any responsibility for these street protests," Ludu Sein Win wrote on the Weekly Eleven website.

If this tense situation continues, the street protests will be inevitable, Myo Yan Naung Thein said: "We have seen similar street protests before. In politics, there will be disagreements and dissent. But in this case, there will be no dissent among the people. We are doing this protest campaign against the Myitsone Dam project with a nationalistic view and conscience. Street protests are inevitable now, and it could have many bad consequences for the ruling government."

At a press conference held in August, the Information Minister said, "We must defend all projects while we are striving for the development of the country. So the government will have to implement these projects by considering them from all angles."

Minister Zaw Min said that there was no one in Burma smarter than him in hydropower generation, and he disclosed that he wrote an article that appeared in a state-run daily newspaper on August 9.

"They [the article] said that they would go ahead with what they were doing now. So we have nothing to say. These are not the words spoken by a politician. We feel very sorry to hear these words. We are surprised to hear that from a person who was not supposed to say such words," said environmentalist and environment protection worker U Ohn, an academic.

The Myitsone Dam project will have a capacity of 6,000 megawatts. Five more dams will be built on the Maykha River and two more dams will be built on the Malikha River. The Maykha and Maylikha rivers are tributaries of the Irrawaddy River. The area of the reservoir for Myitsone Dam will be 18,000 square miles. The dam height will be 152 metres (500 feet) and the height of the reservoir will be 299 metres (980 feet), according to a Kachin Development Network Group report.

The China Power Investment Corporation (CPI) is funding the Myitsone Dam project along with Burma's state-owned Myanmar Electric Power Enterprise. Private companies including Asia World owned by Steven Law and his family are working on the project as a joint venture.



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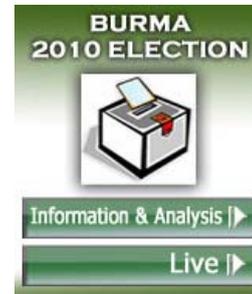
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