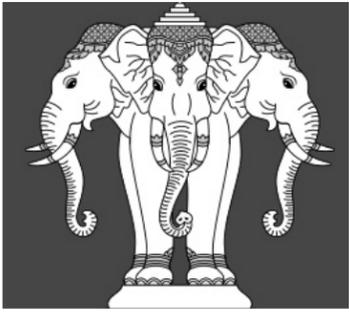


World Bank Helping to Dam Southeast Asia



Laos is a place of remarkable beauty, world-renowned biodiversity and abundant natural resources.

Lao rivers and lands are being threatened by mining, rampant logging and

land-grabbing for the development of large plantations. The only thing holding up utter annihilation is the rugged mountainous terrain. In the early 1990s when Cambodia's Virachey National Park was first created—Vietnam's contiguous Chu Mom Ray National Park was gazetted a decade later in 2002—ideals were running high and the idea was proposed to make the Tri-Border Region a **“Tri-Border Ecological Peace Park”** between Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Unfortunately, as time passed, ideals gave way to business interests, and instead the region was designated as a **“Tri-Border Economic Development Zone.”** What has followed is deforestation, large-scale agribusiness, road-building, dam-building, and **“economic development”** in its myriad and often exploitative forms. At least Virachey and Chu Mom Ray were designated as national parks and their demise can be documented. These destructive developments are often linked: forests are cleared for plantations, mines and hydro reservoirs; and hydropower is generated to fuel mining operations.

Laos has not been reluctant to let the world know about its ambition to become the largest energy exporter in the region as of part of efforts to realize its goal, the landlocked communist country has pushing for building more hydropower plants over the years, in spite of the current and projected impacts on the future of the Mekong

River, one of the world's longest, largest, and resource-rich rivers.

Yet how to achieve these growing energy needs is the real question, and on this, there are unsurprisingly divided opinions. The Lao government has long said that it views hydropower as critical to its energy needs. According to one estimate, Laos currently operates a total of 42 power plants: 39 hydropower plants, one coal-burn lignite plant, and two sugarcane-powered plants. As numbers suggest, the country's energy production heavily depends on hydropower plants and that tendency is expected to grow. A total of 53 hydropower plants are under construction or in the planning stage, while there will be more than 90 hydropower plants to be constructed in the country in coming years.

The country is traversed by a thousand rivers that teem with life. This vast Lao river network also plays an essential role in the Mekong Basin, contributing 35% of the Mekong River's flow. But these rivers that are the lifeline of rural communities and local economies are being blocked, diverted and decimated by dams. The Lao government hopes to transform the country into **“the Battery of Southeast Asia”** by exporting the power to Thailand and Vietnam. **Unfortunately for the Laotian people, the government has been importing the same hydro-generated power back from Thailand at an increased price.**

Most of Lao hydropower, not to mention gold, copper, timber and rubber, is shipped to Thailand, Vietnam and China. The companies and investors driving the current Lao hydro-boom hail from Thailand, China, Vietnam and Malaysia, with the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and companies from Japan, France and Norway remain on the scene. The Lao hydropower development plan contains 72 new large dams, 12 of which are under construction

and nearly 25 at advanced planning stages (see map and table). Included in these are a series of nine dams on the lower Mekong Mainstream, of which Xayaburi was the first to begin construction, followed by the Don Sahong Dam.

Alternative development paths do exist: researchers and development agencies have pointed to solutions that would improve the security, resilience and sustainability of rural livelihoods, and the management of the Lao economy as a whole, but these solutions have not been adopted by the Lao government or big donor agencies.

Critics have rightly sought to draw attention to the potential for negative impacts, such as long-term environment consequences and the threat to more traditional industries, including fishing and farming, in the broader Mekong subregion. As an example, International Rivers, an NGO that has long been focused on the Mekong River, has repeatedly shown that impacts of to-be-built dams are expected to result in a drastic reduction in food security and agricultural productivity, alongside increased poverty levels and heightened climate vulnerability in much of the Lower Mekong Basin.

Despite this overwhelming evidence, Laos still seems determined to boost its hydropower output. Government officials still say that they are convinced that its needs can be addressed even while managing or mitigating these concerns. Though there might be a case for such a balanced approach, to date the concerns around the Mekong River, including by neighboring states, have not only continued but have in some ways heightened. Whether Laos likes it or not, that reality will likely continue to complicate its hydropower ambitions for years to come.

**Thanks to
Tae-jun Kang thedi diplomat.com &
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ANOTHER CONSPIRACY TRIAL FADES AWAY

Government lawyers have pursued felony charges against everyone they could connect to the Inauguration Day march branded as **#DisruptJ20**, generating dozens of separate group trials that sprawled out over nearly a year and a half. Prosecutors dropped charges on Thursday against a half-dozen people the government has sought to imprison for decades for their roles in planning a 2017 anti-Trump march. Their case relied heavily on videos provided by the right-wing hoax group Project Veritas.

The judge in the case, visibly angry on the bench as prosecutors could not explain why their colleagues had lied to him about hiding some 69 separate video and audio recordings provided by that group from defense counsel, including material the lawyers say would have helped their clients.

The defendants grinned and nodded to one another in the courtroom Thursday as prosecutors first announced their plans to drop the cases. When Judge Morin ruled to dismiss the conspiracy charge with prejudice, some in the group cried out happily or clapped their hands, prompting Morin to turn his ire briefly toward them.

The government is left chasing relatively minor punishments in those cases if it cannot argue that a felonious conspiracy tied all the defendants together in collective guilt for the property damage on Inauguration Day. Prosecutors can still pursue misdemeanor rioting and property damage charges if they wish, but are forbidden from charging a conspiracy to riot — the most serious felony among the several counts levied against the marchers.

After saying Thursday they intended to pursue misdemeanors against three defendants whose cases were affected by Morin's ruling, prosecutors reversed course late Friday and dropped all of those charges as well. The decisions leave 49 people, including the cluster whose jury began deliberating Thursday evening, still facing serious prison time unless prosecutors continue abandoning individual cases across the remainder of the indicted group.

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So' Hum
LAW
CENTER

RICHARD JAY MOLLER

(707) 923-9199

jaym@humboldt.net

P.O. Box 1669
Redway, CA 95560

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Smoking Caterpillar



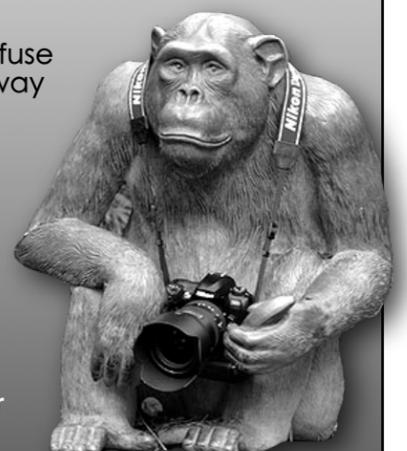
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