

A new Thai-Lao lignite mine will threaten environmental health in Hongsa District (Lao PDR) – call for journalist investigation

Hongsa District in Lao PDR is home to numerous traditional villages which settled hundreds of years ago, in a well-preserved environment located between Thai border and the Mekong river. The main economic activities in Hongsa are agriculture, mainly rice paddies and cattle, as well as handicraft. Also for few years now, ecotourism has been growing quickly due to the beauty of the nature as well as the unique culture of the elephant in this region: Hongsa is actually considered the (reference) for 'mahout'-ship in the whole of Lao PDR, thanks primarily to the Leu ethnic people who live in the area. The living standards have been improving for the last decades, following a quiet economical growth supported by agriculture, forest products and tourism. However, for several months now the life in Hongsa has been dramatically changing because of the beginning of a new lignite mine project.

Nowadays, the mining company expropriates many traditional villages in Hongsa, in order to exploit a 60 km² open-pit lignite mine. The huge economic boom attracts thousands of migrants, mainly from China, but also from Thailand, who work for the company or start new private businesses. This phenomenon increases the corruption of local authorities, and brings omnipresent prostitution. Such acute changes in this former sparsely populated rural area induce cultural shock and disturb the local economy and traditions. The villagers are also concerned about their food security in the future as the mine is being built on large rice paddy areas. Local population has been previously consulted by authorities, and voted against the project at a large majority. However, their opinions have not been considered and the project started quickly after. So far, they have got no information about where or when they will have to move.

Hongsa Power Company manages an open-pit lignite mine project started in 2010 in partnership between Thailand and Lao PDR. The purpose of this mine is to run a 1,878 megawatt electricity generator located on the same site, using lignite as a fuel. The investment comes from Ratchaburi Holding Electricity Generating Company Ltd. (a private electricity generator in Thailand), which got a US\$2.7 billion loan from nine financial institutes from Thailand. As defined in an MOU signed with the government of Lao PDR in 2007, nearly 100% of the electricity produced by the generator will be sold directly to Thailand at fixed price. Today, the construction of the mine is ongoing and it is planned to produce electricity in 2015.

Lignite mines are well-known for their many environmentally harmful effects. The long list includes contamination of air and water by toxics like heavy metals (especially mercury and arsenic), radioactive chemicals (radon) and polycyclic hydrocarbons, as well as inducing acid rains and global warming. This type of mine affects directly the health of the local population, especially with lung cancer due to exposure to ash, and chronic diseases due to chemically contaminated air and water. Crops and domestic animals, such as elephants and other livestock, are also affected by these pollutants. Instead of explaining these effects, the mining company and local authorities have heavily advertised the project as a "eco-friendly" (see figures below) which will bring tourists interested in visiting the mine.

Nowadays in Thailand, lignite mining projects are heavily contested by the population because of their harmful effects on the environment and the health of the local population. For example in Lampang Province, two thousand people protested against a new lignite mine project in July 2010. But Lao PDR is a country where environmental health is not yet highly considered, and where there is a lack of organized civil society. This is why Thai companies can easily set up projects that would be refused in their own country either by the citizenry or the regulators.

Because of the involvement of a Thai company, and the harmful effects the mine will have on humans and animals (especially the threatened elephant population), the story of Hongsa district has to be known by Thai citizens and authorities.

Please see below some key features of Hongsa Power Company, Illustrations and selected references.

Key features

The surface of the mine will be 60 km² (6,000 Hectares), mainly taken from rice paddies. Another site will be used for limestone carry 35 km from the site.

2 reservoirs (one upstream Hongsa, and one downstream) will be created in order to supply the mine with water.

367 households from 5 villages (about 2,000 people) will be expropriated.

Electricity will be sent to Thailand via new high-voltage power lines built over a length of 67 km between Thailand and Laos.

A Thai consulting company, TEAM Consulting Engineering and Management Co., Ltd, is in charge of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), Social Impact Assessment (SIA), Environmental Management Plan (EMP) and Resettlement Action Plan (RAP).

Figures

Image of the Hongsa lignite mine provided by the company:



Image of the mine site in March 2011



Selected references

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