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Chinese experts appeal to authorities to suspend big dam projects in southwest China following Sichuan's deadly earthquake

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Experts in geology, water conservancy, and environmental protection have jointly appealed to authorities in Beijing to temporarily suspend the approval of big hydro dams in geologically unstable areas in southwest China.

Reporting by Zhang Ke

Ran in the *First Business Daily* (*Diyi caijing bao*) on June 12, 2008

Translated by *Three Gorges Probe*

Experts in geology, water conservancy, and environmental protection have jointly appealed to authorities in Beijing to temporarily suspend the approval of big hydro dams in geologically unstable areas in southwest China, in the wake of the deadly May 12 earthquake. They argue that top priority should be given to doing a careful and detailed investigation of all dams and reservoirs in the disaster affected region, and that no more large scale dam projects should be approved before risk assessments of reservoirs in Sichuan are completed, the *First Business Daily* (*Diyi caijing bao*) reported on June 12, 2008.

The experts include Yang Yong, guest researcher at the Chengdu Institute for Mountain Hazards and Environmental Research of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Fan Xiao, chief engineer of the Regional Geology Investigation Team of the Sichuan Geology and Mineral Bureau, Liu Shukun, senior researcher at the China Institute for Water Conservancy and Hydropower Planning and Design, Zheng Yisheng, senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Ma Jun, director of the Institute of Public & Environmental Affairs, Li Dun, professor at the Center for Study of Contemporary China of the Qinghua University, Liang Xiaoyan, general manager of Friends of Nature, and Wang Yongchen, head of the Green Earth Volunteers.

The experts presented their arguments in a petition letter entitled "Temporarily suspend the approval of big hydro dams in geologically unstable areas in southwest China" at a Beijing seminar that focused on a re-assessment of the construction of hydro dams in southwest China after the Longmenshan earthquake. They are planning to submit their letter to the central

government.

In their letter, the experts appeal for five measures: a re-assessment of the seismic intensities that southwest China's large-scale hydro dams were designed to withstand; a re-examination of the risks posed by the cascades of dams and reservoirs to the downstream areas in the event of earthquakes; studies to determine the risk that reservoirs could induce seismic activity (RIS) in geologically unstable regions; emergency plans for areas affected by the May 12 earthquake and other areas where hydro dams are built in geologically unstable zones; and, lastly, a re-examination of official plans to massively and intensively develop southwest China's water resources and construct cascades of hydro dams throughout rivers in southwest China.

Contributor, Ma Jun, said that while a host of problems were exposed after the May 12 earthquake in Sichuan, the biggest one is the safety of hydro dams. If anything were to go wrong with dams and reservoirs as a result of an earthquake, the casualties and property loss would be greater than those caused by the earthquake itself.

E Jingping, vice-minister of the Ministry of Water Resources, said at the State Council's news conference held on May 25, 2008 that as many as 2,830 reservoirs were damaged by the earthquake in Sichuan, Chongqing, Shaanxi and five other provinces. In Sichuan province alone, 69 dams are in danger of collapse, 310 have been deemed high risk, and 1,424 pose a moderate risk.

"Because of the rapid changes in the region's geology and the huge contrast in the region's terrain, (Editor's note: geomorphology such as the Tibetan Plateau juxtaposed with the Sichuan Basin) western China is one of the regions with the richest hydropower resources in the world, but at the same time, it is also extremely geologically unstable, with the highest environmental risk associated with developing its water resources," geologist Fan Xiao said. Mr. Fan has argued that, far from being a region that enjoys special favours of nature in its hydropower resources, southwest China is challenged by its geological and environmental dangers and risks.

According to the experts, both Sichuan and Yunnan are the two provinces where the most earthquakes have occurred in China. In Sichuan alone, there are at least eight seismic belts: the Xianshuihe River belt, the Anninghe-Zemuhe belt, the Litang belt, the Jinsha River belt, the Longmenshan belt, the Songpan belt, the Mingshan-Mabian-Zhaotong belt and the Muli-Yanyuan seismic zone. Similarly, northwest Yunnan is also an earthquake-prone and geologically unstable area.

Many hydro dams have already been built and still more are planned for seismically active, earthquake prone areas, the experts point out. "The cascade of dams on the Dadu River (tributary of the Yangtze) have been and will be built in the Xianshuihe seismic belt; the cascade of dams built on the Yalong River (tributary of the Yangtze) are really close to the Anninghe-Zemuhe seismic belt; the Xiluodu dam on the Jinsha River (main channel of the upper Yangtze) is being built in the Yongshan seismic belt, and the dam projects proposed in the Lancang-Mekong and Nu rivers are located in the Three Parallel Rivers tectonic active belt," Yang Yong said.

"Currently, it appears that most reservoirs (in the May 12 earthquake affected area) pose little threat because the reservoirs are nearly empty. But the now hidden troubles will become apparent as the flooding season approaches, the reservoirs are filled once again, and geological disasters start to occur," said Yang Yong.

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