
Laos: Suez Energy International and the Houay Ho dam

"We want to hold accountable those companies that built or profited from the dam - the Korean company that built it or the Belgian company that owns the dam now. There should be letters sent saying, 'You are making money from this, why don't you take some responsibility and help all those people impacted by this project - allow them to move back?' We need to have enough land for us to be able to farm, which means moving to areas we consider our old territory, and we need to be given the right to live there with self respect and independence."

A Nya Heun man, from Champasak province in the south of Laos, said this to Oxfam Australia's Melanie Scaife in November 2005. The dam he's talking about is the Houay Ho dam built by a consortium of Daewoo (South Korea), Loxley (Thailand) and Electricité du Lao. Electricity from the 150 MW dam is exported to Thailand. In 2001, Belgian company Tractebel Electricity and Gas International bought up a majority share of the dam. In 2003, after a merger, Tractebel EGI became Suez Energy International, a wholly owned subsidiary of multinational corporation Suez.

Melanie Scaife's interview with a Nya Huen man who she called Boun, to protect his identity, is published in International Rivers Network's April 2006 issue of World Rivers Review.

"Before the dam was built we used to have enough to eat," Boun told Scaife. "We fished the rivers, collected vegetables in the forest and had plenty of rice. We lived on our own without having to depend on aid or support from anyone else. Now in the resettlement areas, we are totally impoverished and dependent on others."

Boun was moved to a resettlement area about 30 kilometers from his home. "We need enough land - this is the basic problem of our people," Boun said. "We don't have access to resources now because we have been moved into an area with no forest or land to call our own. My people used to live in a very big forest and were used to living in an expansive area with a lot of natural resources. Now we've been put in a very concentrated area where all the resources around us are owned by somebody else and it's a huge shock for us, a huge change from what we were used to."

Since being moved to the resettlement area, many villagers are forced to sell their labour to survive, working in nearby villages weeding other people's land. Some villagers have started moving back to areas near their old villages. "We are returning as close as we can to our old territory, to land not flooded by the reservoir," Boun said. "We are not allowed to move back to our old areas, so officially we are living in the resettlement sites but in reality we are hardly there at all. Last year about half of the families abandoned the resettlement sites - this year it's up to two thirds. At this point the government has not actively stopped us from moving back but in the future, who knows?"

In 2004, Proyecto Gato, a Belgian NGO, filed a complaint under the OECD's Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, arguing that Suez Energy International should be responsible for adequate compensation for the people forced to move to make way for the dam. Proyecto Gato also asked Suez Energy International to make basic health care, education equipment and medicine available to the resettled villagers.

Suez Energy International argued that it was not responsible because the resettlement was carried out before they bought into the project. The OECD supported the company's argument, citing a letter from the Lao Minister of Industry which stated that Energy International had fulfilled its contractual obligations to the Lao government.

In February 2005, as a result of the pressure from Proyecto Gato, Suez Energy International repaired several drinking water wells in the Houay Ho resettlement area. But issues crucial to the Nya Heun's livelihood such as land remain unresolved.

In October 2005, the Vientiane Times reported that the Houay Ho Power Company (of which Suez Energy International owns 70 per cent) planned to invest US\$20 million to expand electricity production from nine hours a day to 24 hours a day. The work would include diverting water from two other rivers into the Houay Ho reservoir.

By coincidence, before I read Melanie Scaife's interview with Boun, I had written three times to Pascal Brancart, Senior Vice-President Sustainable Business Development at Suez Energy International. I asked Brancart for a copy of the environmental impact assessment for the expansion, as well as a full list of all the documents produced on this project. I asked whether the work involved the construction of any new dams (either by Suez Energy International or any other companies). I asked whether the work would result in any new evictions. I asked about studies of the downstream impacts of diverting water into the Houay Ho reservoir. I asked whether Suez Energy International considers that the resettlement problems associated with the Houay Ho dam are now resolved. And I asked for a copy of the environmental assessment report (which Swiss consultants Electrowatt completed while dam construction was underway in the 1990s) and the due diligence report (carried out by the engineering consulting firm Knight Piésold before Tractebel bought a majority share in the dam) - documents that the company has repeatedly declined to release.

Brancart did not reply to my e-mails. So far he has not returned my phone calls. I intend to keep trying. When I do speak to him, I'll pass on Boun's message to Suez Energy International: "One: take responsibility for the dam's impacts. Two: help us return to our home."

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