



15 June 2010

To: Mr. Jeremy Bird,
Chief Executive Officer,
Mekong River Commission Secretariat,
Vientiane, Lao PDR.

By Email and Fax

Re: Call for the Complete Release of Data on the 2010 Mekong Region Drought

To Mr. Bird,

As you are aware, in 2010 the Mekong Region has suffered its worse drought in decades. Fishers and farmers who depend on the river for their livelihoods, especially in Northern Laos, Thailand, southwest China and Viet Nam, have suffered from declining fish catches, reduced water for irrigated agriculture, livestock and drinking, and grounded river transportation affecting trade and tourism.

The situation was covered extensively by the media, and the role that China's Lancang (upper Mekong) dam cascade played in the drought came under scrutiny given the dams' poor transparency on reservoir water-levels and dam operation data. Throughout the drought period, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) Secretariat was very visible in the media.

China started operating its first dam - the Manwan dam - on the Lancang mainstream in 1992. The second and third dams, Dachaoshan and Jinghong, were completed in 2003 and 2008. In July 2009, the Xiaowan Dam, which has a capacity of at least 15 cubic kilometers of water, started filling its reservoir.¹ The filling of the Xiaowan Dam's reservoir coincided with the period of reduced rainfall and then drought.

While less rainfall was undoubtedly a key factor in the 2010 drought, a question that remains urgent and unanswered is whether the Xiaowan dam's reservoir filling compounded the drought's severity. In media statements and reports on the drought, the MRC sought to exonerate China's Lancang dams from the severity of the drought through progressively definite statements, despite the fact that data was not released to the public either by China or the MRC that conclusively supported this position. The following are a few examples of statements made by the MRC to demonstrate this point:

- On 25 February 2010, the Thai NMC Secretariat released a report to the Thai Parliament Committee on Communication and Public Participation, chaired by M.P. Kraiak Choonhavan. The report found that: After the first two dams were built on the Mekong in China, the water level recorded at Chiang Saen hydro-meteorological station fluctuated

more frequently. After three dams were built on the Mekong in China, the water level fell significantly by 1.5 meters and the discharge decreased from $680 \text{ m}^3\text{s}^{-1}$ to $430 \text{ m}^3\text{s}^{-1}$ between 24 January and 23 February 2010.ⁱⁱ

- On 26 February 2010, the MRC issued a statement headlined “Drought conditions cause low Mekong water flows.” The statement attributed the low Mekong River water-levels to a “drier than normal” wet season in 2009 combined with “a consistent pattern of monthly precipitation significantly below average amounts since September 2009” in Yunnan Province China, Northern Thailand and Northern Laos. No reference was made to the role that the Lancang dams may have potentially played.ⁱⁱⁱ
- On 5 March 2010, the MRC released a report titled “Preliminary Report on Low Water Level Conditions in the Mekong Mainstream.”^{iv} The report concluded that “The higher than natural levels in the Mekong River experienced at Chiang Saen in early to mid-January resulted from hydropower operations upstream. These levels then reduced to to [sic] levels closer to those of the usual conditions in late January *as reservoir storage levels upstream fell in response to the drought.*” [p10, *emphasis added*] The report acknowledged, however, that the only information available on the Lancang Dam’s “very low” reservoir levels was that reported by unreferenced Chinese news agencies (p6). In other words, no quantitative data on reservoir levels were available to the MRC to authoritatively draw this conclusion.
- On 15 March 2010, you published an opinion piece in the Bangkok Post titled “Low river levels caused by extreme low rainfall.”^v Having reiterated the MRC’s earlier analysis on rainfall and the drought, you noted that “In Thailand, many media reports place the blame for low Mekong levels on the mainstream Chinese hydropower schemes” and then go on to state that these dams “store water during the wet season that can be used during the dry season.” Whilst official statements from China state that the impounding of the Xiaowan Dam is occurring only in the rainy season, data that proves this has not been made not publicly available.^{vi} Rather than state the absence of this critical primary data as a fact and as a knowledge gap, you seek to prove that China’s dams are not impounding water in the dry season by extrapolating data from Chiang Saen monitoring station in Northern Thailand.^{vii} In the absence of primary data this seems a reasonable approach; however it should have been clearly stated that the data and methodology used was indirect in assessing the reservoir’s water storage upstream, along with the methodology’s uncertainties. Later in the opinion piece, however, you acknowledge that it is not possible with the available data to determine whether “there is any scope for release of water stored upstream from last year’s wet season to raise the historically low water levels.”
- On 25 March 2010, AFP wrote “‘It’s difficult for us to say categorically that there’s no link’ between the low water levels and those [Lancang] dams, Bird said. But he added it would not be normal for dams to be filled during the dry season.”^{viii}
- On 26 March 2010, the MRC issued a press release asserting that “Analysis already published by the MRC has shown that the low flows are caused by extremely low rainfall, rather than any man-made infrastructure on the river.” This statement appears to refer to the report of 5 March 2010, which did not reach this conclusion with the conviction conveyed in the press release.^{ix}
- On 5 April 2010, the MRC issued a press release stating “Activists have recently claimed water shortages in northern Thailand and Lao PDR, are caused by Chinese dams on the mainstream of the Mekong. The MRC has said in earlier statements that there is no

evidence to back up this claim, reiterating that current water shortages are due to the regional drought.” The MRC did not provide evidence to justify such a firm position. This statement and the MRC press release on March 26 does not entirely correspond with the quote you may to AFP on 25 March 2010.

We acknowledge that China’s agreement to release partial river datasets from late March until the end of the drought period is a positive step in the right direction. While the details of the agreement on data sharing between China and the MRC remain unclear, we believe that the data released to the MRC is not complete and thus is inadequate for complete analysis of the root causes and contributory factors of the drought.

From the media and MRC reports, we understand that:

- China has been a ‘dialogue partner’ of the MRC since 1996, and since 2002 has been sharing observed water levels, discharge and rainfall data during the rainy season from the Jinghong and Manwan hydro-meteorological stations.^x
- On 26 March 2010, an MRC press release announced that “China has indicated that it is prepared to begin providing the MRC Secretariat with data during this dry season from the hydro-meteorological stations at Jinghong and Man’an, starting this week”^{xi}
- On 5 April 2010, an MRC press release states “... China has agreed to share information on its river flows and dam operations. In a side meeting between the MRC and China at the Summit, China provided further hydro-meteorological data concerning the operation of its dams on the mainstream Mekong during the current dry season.”^{xii}
- On 5 April 2010, the Nation quoted you as saying “Some more cooperation has been coming from China since the dry season started, as countries are now sharing information on a daily basis, notably on the operating schedule of hydropower projects.”^{xiii}
- Daily data is currently on the MRC website for Jinghong and Manwan hydrological stations from 15 March 2010 to present detailing observed water levels, discharge and observed rainfall.^{xiv}

Given the insufficient data in the public domain, we believe that MRC’s assertive position that China’s Lancang dams did not contribute to the drought was irresponsible and inappropriate. Consequentially, the MRC sacrificed its scientific objectivity and integrity and failed to act in the interests of all basin stakeholders. The MRC should have clearly stated that insufficient data was available to determine the cause of the drought, while also listing the data required of China needed for complete analysis to be undertaken. If the data has been made available to the MRC but not made public, then it should be released in the public interest.

We would like to ask you the following questions:

- 1. Can you please clarify what information has been made available to the MRC by China and place this data in the public domain. In particular:**
 - a. The “operating schedule of hydropower projects” resulting from the side-meeting between the MRC and China, referred to in the MRC statement on 5 April 2010**

- b. Data on water levels in each of the Lancang dam’s reservoirs, in particular Xiaowan Dam**
 - c. Inflow and outflow data for each Lancang dam, in particular for Xiaowan since it commenced impounding.**
- 2. In your Bangkok Post opinion piece, you stated “A team of MRC modellers will be working with Chinese counterparts over the next weeks to exchange information and better analyze and understand both the current situation and longer term changes.” Can you please clarify the outcome of these exchange meetings, and put into the public domain any reports or information released to the MRC and/or generated by the exchange program regarding the low River water levels and the role of China’s dams?**
- 3. In addition, if the MRC’s visit to Yunnan, reported in the MRC Press Statement dated 7 June 2010, has provided supplemental data on the Lancang Dams water levels, please can you place this data in the public domain?^{xv}**
- 4. Can you please provide details on agreements for future data sharing between China and the MRC during the dry season, and this data’s release to the public?**

We believe that it is vital that all available information be put in the public domain to allow independent analysis of the causes of the low flows on the Mekong River.

Given the lack of publicly accessible data, it is not surprising that communities in downstream countries are suspicious of the Lancang dams’ contribution to the drought. Academics have previously linked changes to the Mekong River’s daily hydrology and sediment load since the early 1990s to the operation of the Lancang dam cascade. As a result, communities downstream in Northern Thailand, Burma and Laos have suffered from a loss of fish and aquatic plant resources, which have impacted local economies and livelihoods. The dams in China have been built without consultation, apology, disclosure of data, compensation or restitution to downstream countries, all of which are now long overdue.

The 2010 drought and China’s upstream dam construction once again demonstrates the need for cooperation among all countries sharing the Mekong River. The complete and timely release of data is an important first step towards building trust and cooperation. The Mekong region’s governments, including China, should proactively work together to share information and build a genuine partnership with riverside communities along the entire length of the river to protect the river for present and future generations.

Yours Sincerely,

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ⁱ Presentation by Yao Wen, Chinese Embassy “Public Forum on Sharing the Mekong River” Chulalongkorn University, 1 April 2010, http://www.savethemekong.org/news_detail.php?nid=97&langss=en

ⁱⁱ “Analysis on Recent Dry Season Drought of the Mekong” Thai NMC, Feb 2010 (in Thai)

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.mrcmekong.org/MRC_news/press10/drought-condition26-2-10.htm

^{iv} “Preliminary Report on Low Water Level Conditions in the Mekong Mainstream” Mekong River Commission Secretariat, 5 March 2010. http://www.mrcmekong.org/download/REVISED_Report-on-low-Mekong-Flows-5mar10.pdf

^v In the opinion piece you also state “that it is important to note that China also has a common interest in raising water levels if it can to alleviate the problems being faced on its river trade route through to northern Thailand” and that “Low volumes of reservoir storage may currently provide little opportunity to act in this way”. However, in early March riverside communities reported that the river’s water level did rise briefly by almost half a meter allowing grounded boats to reach Luang Prabang.

^{vi} On 1 April 2010, Yao Wen, First Secretary of the Embassy of the Peoples Republic of China, said that that the Xiaowan dam had started impoundment in July 2009 and stopped filling at the beginning of the dry season, and that water flow released from the dam had exceeded the water received to elevate dry season waters in the downstream (Presentation by Yao Wen, Chinese Embassy “Public Forum on Sharing the Mekong River” Chulalongkorn University, 1 April 2010). The MRC’s press release on 26 March 2010 also states “China informed MRC of their plans to limit impoundment of upstream dams to only the wet season thus avoiding any low flow impacts downstream.”

^{vii} “The underlying trend of flow recorded at Chiang Saen for the period from the end of the wet season 2009 indicates a similar pattern to previous dry years although with a more extreme slope due to the very low rainfall conditions. In early to mid January, there was an increase above this trend due to hydropower generation upstream which had the effect of delaying the onset of the extreme low flow conditions. However, limited storage upstream appears to have been a constraint to further supplementing low river flows.” *Low river levels caused by extreme low rainfall* by Jeremy Bird, Bangkok Post, 15 March 2010.

^{viii} “Record low Mekong River poses threat to millions” AFP, Feb 25, 2010
http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ivyv0nL-g_pLaxJERKoQMfNfFi7g

^{ix} MRC Press Release 26.3.10 "China ready to share data on Mekong water levels ahead of regional river summit" http://www.mrcmekong.org/mrc_news/press10/China-ready-to-share-data-26-mar-10.htm

^x On 1 April 2010, Yao Wen, First Secretary of the Embassy of the Peoples Republic of China, said that since 2006 China had also signed an agreement with the MRC that it might share additional data on a voluntary basis.

^{xi} "China ready to share data on Mekong water levels ahead of regional river summit" MRC press release, 26.3.10 http://www.mrcmekong.org/mrc_news/press10/China-ready-to-share-data-26-mar-10.htm

^{xii} "Mekong Prime Ministers agree to prioritise climate change as summit ends: China agrees to increase cooperation with basin countries" MRC 5.4.10

^{xiii} "China to cooperate more with others on Mekong" The Nation, April 5, 2010

^{xiv} <http://ffw.mrcmekong.org/tabulardata.htm>

^{xv} MRC Press Release 7.6.10 "Mekong Commission visits China dams and will discuss future cooperation" http://www.mrcmekong.org/MRC_news/press10/Mekong-Commission-visits-China-dams.htm