

Urgent Call for a Negotiated Agreement To End the Violence in the Merowe/Hamadab Dam-Affected Areas

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Introduction

After months of growing tensions, and despite warnings from concerned citizens and NGOs, the area that is being affected by the Merowe/Hamadab Dam Project in Northern Sudan erupted in violence on November 29. The Corner House and International Rivers Network call on all actors – including the Sudanese government, the government’s donors, civil society, the financial institutions and the companies involved in the Merowe/Hamadab Dam Project – to use their good offices to press for a negotiated, peaceful agreement between the dam authorities and the affected communities.

Unfair Treatment Fuels Growing Tensions

With a capacity of 1,250 megawatts and a reservoir that stretches 174 kilometers, the Merowe/Hamadab Dam Project in Northern Sudan is the largest hydropower project that is currently under construction in Africa.¹ The project is being built by Chinese and Sudanese companies. It is financed by the China Export Import Bank and various Arab financial institutions. Major contracts have been awarded to Lahmeyer International, Alstom, and ABB.²

The dam project will displace about 50,000 people. Several thousand people have already been moved to El Multaga, a resettlement site in the Nubian Desert. A visit by the Corner House and International Rivers Network in February 2005 revealed that the situation in El Multaga is grim.

¹ For further information on the project, see *A Critical Juncture for Peace, Democracy, and the Environment: Sudan and the Merowe/Hamadab Dam Project*, a report published by IRN and the Corner House in May 2005, available at www.irn.org/programs/merowe/pdf/050428merowe.pdf. A further eyewitness report about the impacts of the project will soon be published by the Leadership Office of the Hamadab Affected People (LOHAP).

² Lahmeyer International of Germany manages the construction of the project; Alstom of France is supplying electro-mechanic equipment; and ABB of Switzerland is building transmission substations. For an overview of the companies’ reactions to the problems of the project, see <http://bhrsriver.jamkit.com/Search/SearchResults?SearchableText=merowe>

The desert soil is extremely poor, and many plots are still covered with sand. The displaced farmers are supposed to pay twelve sacks of wheat for seeds and fertilizer per year, but manage to produce less than two sacks on average. Poverty is rising rapidly, and many families are reported to have left the resettlement site.

The affected communities have elected or appointed committees with a mandate to represent their interests. The communities that have not yet been displaced – and particularly the large group of Manasir communities – have demanded to be resettled to sites of their own choice. They are overwhelmingly asking to be resettled not in the desert, but in sites on the shores of the future reservoir.

The Sudanese government – and in particular the dam authorities – have refused to recognize the committees of the affected communities, or to engage in any negotiations with them. They are instead putting pressure on the communities to leave their homes, and have resorted to a divide-and-rule tactic. Basic services have been deliberately withheld, and the prices of essential agricultural inputs have been massively increased. Health and education services are only offered to villages and families that are affiliated with the dam authorities.

On September 18, 2005, the government's newly created Dams Implementation Unit confiscated all agricultural land in Northern State, where the Merowe/Hamadab Project is located. This decision was met by a public outcry, and has increased tensions in the region.

The conflicts escalate

The conflicts in the dam-affected area escalated in recent days. In November 2005, Chinese contractors of the dam project occupied wells in the Sani area, a centre of Manasir nomads. They prevented women and children from fetching water, and stated that they needed the water for construction activities and their own domestic use. The nomads immediately called the Manasir Committee for help. Again, the dam authorities refused to recognize the Committee, and asserted that all lands and wells were now their own property. The discussions broke down at a later meeting, when the representative of the dam authority challenged the nomads to “ride the highest of their horses” – a Sudanese proverb meaning that they should call for war.³

On November 29, according to reports from the area, violence erupted on Sherri Island, a Nile island in the Manasir area. Since August 2004, the islanders had asked that the dam authorities close down their office on the island, which had been a constant source of tension. When representatives of the villagers delivered an ultimatum to close down the office, security forces attempted to arrest them. As the security forces searched houses and terrorized villagers, scuffles broke out. The dam offices in the area were set afire and destroyed. Large demonstrations against the dam authorities are currently taking place on the island. According to unconfirmed reports, the government has dispatched three army battalions to the area in an attempt to bring the situation under control.

³ For some further information on this incident, see an article in the *Sudan Tribune* at www.sudantribune.com/article.php?id_article=12802

A call for a negotiated agreement

The demands of the dam-affected communities – the recognition of their committees and resettlement at sites of their own choice – are totally legitimate. It is unacceptable to push through the Merowe/Hamadab Dam Project by suppressing the rights and destroying the livelihoods of the affected people. Doing so will increase tensions and social unrest.

Most major international institutions have endorsed the Strategic Priorities of the World Commission on Dams (WCD). The WCD priorities include “Gaining Public Acceptance” and “Recognizing Entitlements and Sharing Benefits”.⁴ By ignoring these fundamental international standards, the Sudanese government puts its own national reconciliation at risk in the conflict over the Merowe/Hamadab Dam.

The Corner House and International Rivers Network call on all actors – the Sudanese government, Sudanese and international civil society, the donors of the Sudanese government, the financial institutions and companies that are involved in the Merowe/Hamadab Dam Project – to use their good offices to press for a negotiated agreement between the dam authorities and the committees of the affected communities. Such an agreement must respect the rights and livelihoods of the affected communities.

All security operations against the affected communities should be stopped immediately. While the conflict in the dam-affected areas remains unresolved and an agreement is being negotiated, all construction activities for the dam project should be halted.

The Corner House and International Rivers Network ask all actors to urgently respond to this appeal.

⁴ The report of the World Commission on Dams is available at www.dams.org .