

## Hydropower Project Threatens Eco-Jewel of Pakistani Kashmir

By Zafar Iqbal

**MUZAFFARABAD, Jammu and Kashmir**, June 12, 2009 (ENS) - Pakistan has initiated a massive hydropower project in its administrative part of Kashmir without fulfilling basic environmental obligations required for such development projects.

Contemporary international environmental laws and standards bind all governments and their publics to conduct environmental impact assessments and ecological surveys for all major projects to achieve the goal of sustainable development.

Regardless, Pakistan's Water And Power Development Authority has started the construction of the US\$2.16 billion Neelum-Jhelum Hydro Project in the remote and scenic Neelum Valley, 100 kilometers (60 miles) northwest of Islamabad, without an environmental impact assessment.

The 969 megawatt project will divert the Neelum River, also called the Kishangana, which originates in the Indian part of Kashmir. The Neelum will flow through a 47 kilometer-long underground tunnel system to another river, the Jehlum, near Muzaffarabad, the capital of the Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

The water rights for this hydropower project are causing a conflict between the two countries. India and Pakistan had agreed on the 1960 Indus Water Treaty, which gives rights of three rivers, the Indus, Chenab and the Jhelum, to India; and three rivers, the Ravi, the Sutlej and the Beas and their tributaries, to Pakistan.



The Neelum River at Nikron (Photo by [Heartkins](#))

However, both parties to the treaty began arguing again after construction of the Bagliar Dam in Indian Administrative Kashmir in 1999. Pakistan now claims that it should get "priority rights" to the use the water of the Neelum River for this hydro project.

Chinese, Norwegian and Pakistani firms are all involved in the project, estimated to take eight years to build. The China Gezhouba Group Co. Ltd. would construct the project while the Norwegian firm NORPLAN, with the collaboration of local firms, would be

responsible for the underground work with involvement in the mechanical, civil and electrical parts of the development.

Once completed, the Neelum-Jhelum Hydro Project would be the first underground hydropower project of its kind in Pakistan.

Officials of the local Environmental Protection Agency working on the project area have confirmed that the Water And Power Development Authority, WAPDA, has started construction work, disregarding environmental considerations and the protection of natural resources and wildlife in this important ecological zone.

The builders insist that the project does not pose any threats to the area's ecological system, as an initial study conducted in the 1990s had suggested "limited environmental impacts of the project."

On the other hand, local ecologists contradict these claims of the WAPDA authorities.

"Much has been changed during this period in terms of people's conditions, needs and ecology and necessitates fresh evaluation of the concealed damages," says an EPA source, who asked to remain unidentified to avoid possible conflict within his agency.

He predicts alarming hazards to the local ecosystem due to the hurried start of the hydro development venture because the government has ignored environmental assessments that are supposed to be conducted for the protection of environment and rights of local populations.



**The city of Muzaffarabad has 750,000 residents.**  
(Photo by [Travlr](#))

Yet there is a great demand for the power the project would produce. Today, 40 percent of Pakistan's population lives without electricity, and the country is facing a severe energy crisis. In some areas the power is out for 16 hours a day, paralyzing the national economy and residents' daily routines.

The government has already scrapped its long disputed Kala Bagh Dam project after uncompromising objections from affected provinces.

Crippled by a surge in extremism, suicide attacks and the recent military operation against the Taliban, Pakistan is struggling to overcome its energy deficiencies in order to run its day-to-day affairs.

The hastily initiated Neelum-Jhelum Hydro Project is part of the government's attempt to alleviate the huge shortfall in meeting energy demand. Sustainable development and public concerns are being ignored in the government's rush to find new sources of power.

The WAPDA is being criticized for bulldozing the rights of the indigenous population, various tribes of Kashmir. They fear that the government will deprive them of their arable land and fruit orchards, which already have been affected by the earthquake of 2005 and the Indo-Pakistani rivalry along the line of control - the defacto border of divided Kashmir.

Also, the package offered by the government to compensate farmers for their lands does not equal to the market price of the property. The compensation offered has been called disgracefully low and has created profound resentment among the landholders.

"The government must pay the compensation of affected land according to market price and arrange alternative residential towns," demands Tariq Ali, a representative of the Action Committee of affected farmers.



**Community in the Neelum Valley (Photo credit unknown)**

Local environmental groups point to deliberate violation of laws by government officials and have expressed their concerns about environmental risks to the local economy and biodiversity of the Neelum Valley. The hydro development would reduce public access to many places, limiting recreational opportunities.

Ecologists say the abundant forests, aquatic life and the presence of many species of globally endangered wild animals in the project area have significant conservation

importance for the Himalayan ecosystem.

The scenic Neelum Valley is inhabited by rare species on the verge of extinction. The world famous Kashmiri otter is now rarely seen in the valley, and ibex, blue sheep, urian, big horned sheep, snow leopards, and flying squirrel are increasingly rare.

The valley is one of the few sites where a breeding population of the western tragopan pheasant, *Tragopan melanocephalus*, still exists. With its brilliant red neck and black and white speckled plumage, the tragopan pheasant is one of the most magnificent in the world.

Other birds such as quills, partridges, vultures, kites, and eagles abound. A rich variety of ducks, geese, cranes, terns and waterfowl still nest in the valley's wetlands, lakes and streams, and the loss of forest and fresh water there is great threat to their habitat.

The Global Environment Facility has contributed millions of U.S. dollars to protect local natural resources through the Machiara National Park Project located in the Neelum Valley, one of the three globally significant national parks selected for a GEF-funded project.

Residents fear the local economy will suffer because of the hydro development. In Kashmir, 88 percent of the population lives in rural areas and depends upon forestry, livestock and agriculture for their existence. Water from these rivers and nearby natural springs is a major source for drinking water and irrigation water for farm lands located along the banks.



**Western tragopan pheasant male**  
(Photo by [Gobind Sagar Bhardwaj](#))

Communities along the Neelum River also are concerned that diversion of the river would cause acute water scarcity, making life miserable for inhabitants. The 750,000 people in the city of Muzaffarabad would be affected because the Neelum River is their chief source of drinking water after it goes through a purification process.

Electricity, too, is a basic human need, but local residents say it must not be generated at the cost of disruption to biodiversity, habitat loss, fragmentation and the displacement of indigenous populations.

Critics of the project say too many hydropower plans are made without looking at the big picture, and as a result these projects can have negative impacts on the environment.

Some of the damage done to biodiversity by hydropower facilities can be reduced by equipment upgrades, mitigation measures, and proper management. Local user groups and other stakeholders want to be involved in the decision-making process to protect peoples' livelihoods and the sustainability of aquatic resources.

They say the river systems should be thoroughly studied together with agencies that have jurisdiction over electricity, irrigation, fisheries and the environment as well as local authorities during the planning and implementation stages of this project.

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