

Experts question safety of Jammu's Baglihar project

Geologists in Jammu and Kashmir have questioned the safety of the 900-MW Baglihar hydroelectric power project across the Chenab river that is to be inaugurated Friday, as 'it is built over an active geological fault'.

The state government says the Rs.52 billion (\$1 billion) project is vital to meet the needs of the energy-starved state. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will Friday inaugurate the first 450-MW phase of the Baglihar project, which has been a contentious issue between India and Pakistan.

Two geologists - one in the government and one in a local university - feel the safety of the Baglihar project is a concern as it is built over an active fault.

The geologists - who spoke on condition of anonymity as they fear harassment by their seniors - said they could not say why this fact had been overlooked.

According to the experts, this fault is 'part of the Murree Thrust that runs from Pakistan up to Himachal Pradesh through the project area'.

They said rocks in the area were constantly being displaced and new cracks were developing in the areas of the fault.

'The earthquake of 2005 has made this fault more vulnerable,' the geologists said.

Engineers associated with the Baglihar project say the fault lies about five km away from the dam site - but the geologists disagree vehemently.

In 2005, Pakistan had sought the World Bank's intervention to stop construction of the Baglihar dam and the hydroelectricity power project. An expert appointed by the World Bank had allowed India to go ahead with the project after a few minor modifications.

The issue came up last month as well during talks between Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly session.

'President Zardari also raised the water issue because Baglihar is filling the dam and the Pakistan Indus Water Commissioner was worried that water flow was low and he had complained to his colleagues,' Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon had told reporters at the time.

The prime minister had assured Zardari that India will abide by its commitment under the 1960 Indus Water Treaty, Menon said.

The 1960 treaty distributes the water of the Indus and its tributaries between India and Pakistan and provides a mechanism for resolving water disputes.

Islamabad contends that the Baglihar dam has deprived Pakistan of critically needed water and has threatened to again seek the World Bank's intervention on the plea that [New Delhi](#) had not responded to its 'repeated complaints' on the issue. India has denied the allegations.

The geologists revealed that the safety issues were brought to the notice of those at the helm of affairs of the state in 2000 but they preferred to go by the advice of Norwegian and German experts. 'They had relatively very little knowledge and also they did not study the ground situation due to disturbed security situation,' said one of the experts.

After the work was allotted to a private firm for constructing the dam, 'we suggested that if at all a project has to be constructed here, then it should be a rock-fill dam and not straight concrete gravity dam,' he added.

This was because a rock-fill dam can take make adjustments when there are displacements in the fault area whereas a concrete dam develops cracks, the experts pointed out.

There were also problems of frequent landslides while constructing diversion tunnels, which then had to be relocated to the other side of the river.

The experts pointed out that during the 2005 earthquake, a four-km stretch of the Jammu-Srinagar national highway that passes through this active fault area had got blocked due to landslides.

'The displacements and fault in this area are at times visible on the road after we cross Peerah, about 150 km from Jammu,' said one expert.

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