

Government hydro plans to proceed, minister says

BY IRWIN LOY

MINISTER of Water Resources and Meteorology Lim Kean Hor used the country's inaugural National Forum on Climate Change to defend the government's support of hydropower development, saying Wednesday that Cambodia will continue its pursuit of hydroelectric power despite criticism of a spate of large-scale dam projects planned for the country. "We have the potential of hydropower, so why don't we use it?" he said. "If we can't use hydropower, we can't develop anything."

Electricity rates in Cambodia are among the most expensive in the region, as the country creates much of its power with costly diesel generators.

However, attempts to expand supply through hydroelectric projects 14 of which are planned across the country - have drawn criticism for their likely social and economic impacts, which could include flooding and the destruction of fisheries.

"There will be negative consequences of dam-building," Edward Allison, climate change director at the WorldFish Center, told the forum Tuesday, adding that Cambodia must balance two competing priorities - electricity generation and food supply.

"It maybe that you accept that there's going to be a decline in capture fisheries and start looking at how people are going to make a living ... and plan for a change in [the] main protein source associated with a future decline in fish supply," he said.

"That sort of planning hasn't been factored in yet."

Compared to alternatives such as burning coal and diesel, hydroelectricity is a better option, said Lay Khim, head of the Environment and Energy Unit at the UN Development Programme.

He said, however, that planners should "consider the potential impacts of the poor who are living downstream from such development[s]".