



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

UNESCO fails its mission to protect unique landscape of Three Parallel Rivers in Tibet

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International Campaign for Tibet statement on UNESCO's draft decision on "Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan"

The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) is gravely concerned about the future of the UNESCO World Heritage-protected site the "Three Parallel Rivers," which is facing numerous threats due to extensive hydropower projects, mining activities that are opaquely reported and expanding infrastructure projects connected to resource extraction and energy production.

In addition, there are fears that a cascade of hydropower projects will lead to the eviction and relocation of thousands of people, among them Tibetans and other vulnerable groups. All of these threats, if they materialize, will contravene the UNESCO World Heritage Convention and international legal principles.

Instead of addressing these threats, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, at its upcoming session in Baku, Azerbaijan, will discuss and likely pass a draft decision¹ on the state of this unique landscape that largely displays indifference toward the impact of these damaging projects. Drafted with the consideration of UNESCO and its expert bodies, the decision in principle surrenders to the Chinese government's strategy of claiming UNESCO protection for the region while exploiting its natural resources at the same time.

Gravely, both the draft decision and the assessment by UNESCO's expert bodies also fail to call for a ban on relocations and evictions.

In light of the draft decision, ICT specifically calls for the following:

- **Relocation prevention:** UNESCO cannot become an accomplice to a thinly veiled forced relocation scheme based on China's argument of "poverty alleviation," which is unsubstantiated. ICT is thus calling for international monitoring of the situation of the local population in and around the UNESCO World Heritage site.
- **Transparency and restoration of damaged sites:** UNESCO should seriously consider investigating any potential damage that may have resulted from legal or illegal mining sites. It should also clarify whether the Chinese state previously informed the World Heritage Committee about any of these sites in accordance with section 172 of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention. Most importantly, the

¹ UNESCO, WHC/19/43.COM/7B.Add.

UNESCO World Heritage Committee should urge China to restore those sites that have been damaged by mining.² The Committee fails to make this call.

- **Honesty about the impact of hydropower projects:** UNESCO should vehemently counter the Chinese government's claim that significant hydropower projects³ in the area would not have any impact on the sensitive ecosystem of the World Heritage site because those projects are situated outside the protected area. The site has been deliberately cut into a cluster of areas to enable the exploitation of natural resources on its edges and in between. While UNESCO is failing to call out this act of bad faith by World Heritage Committee member China, the draft decision is calling instead to "ensure that the last remaining free flowing river Nujiang is not altered by hydropower development," which appears to be a desperate plea and an expression of surrender to China's strategies.

UNESCO has not so far seriously confronted these worrying developments near the Three Parallel Rivers area. ICT is concerned that this pattern of Chinese government impunity and convenient indifference by UNESCO may reflect UNESCO's sensitive relationship with organizations closely linked to the Chinese state.

For example, UNESCO's International Water Conference in Paris on May 13 and 14 was sponsored by the Global Energy Interconnection Development and Cooperation Organization (GEIDCO), which is led by Chairman Liu Zhenya, former president of the State Grid Corporation of China and alternate member of the 17th Chinese Communist Party central committee.

The World Hydropower Congress, held in Paris immediately after the UNESCO conference, was organized by the International Hydropower Association, whose executive vice president, Liu Chuxue, is also vice president of China's Three Gorges Corporation, which built one of the world's most notorious dams that displaced more than 1.2 million people and set records for the number of cities and towns flooded, corruption, human rights violations and environmental degradation.

In light of these worrisome developments, ICT is calling on UNESCO to restore its credibility and fulfil its mission to protect sites of unique and outstanding value, such as the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan.

² See International Campaign for Tibet, 'A Unique Landscape Under Threat: The 'Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan'', in: World Heritage Watch Report 2019, June 2019, p. 53-57, A Unique Landscape Under Threat: The 'Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan.'

³ See International Campaign for Tibet, 'Damming Tibet's rivers – New threats to Tibetan area under UNESCO protection', June 2019, <https://savetibet.org/damming-tibets-rivers-new-threats-to-tibetan-area-under-unesco-protection/>.