THE CHINA VISIT

Chrétien flip-flops, now favors huge dam

ANALYSIS: Liberals now support a project that requires the forced relocation of 1.3 million Chinese to remote areas

By Dave Todd
Citizen correspondent

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's endorsement Tuesday of Canadian involvement in China's plan to build the world's largest dam project is a stunning reversal of Liberal policy on environmental and international development issues.

During the five years before the Liberals took power in 1993, they blasted the Mulroney government for ignoring what they depicted as an economic, environmental and human disaster in the making, and even demanded legislation to ensure no federal funds or loan guarantees would be earmarked for the Three Gorges project.

But since taking office last year, Chrétien and former overseas development critic Christine Stewart (now secretary of state for Latin America and Africa) have declined to answer environmentalists' appeals that they reaffirm the previous Liberal stand.

"Neither one of them has answered our letters," said Pat Adams, whose Toronto-based environmental network, Probe International, is spearheading a global campaign to kill financing for the dam scheme, which would result in the forcible relocation of an estimated 1.3 million people to remote parts of China.

Denouncing Chrétien's endorsement of the project in Beijing and his call for Canadian involvement in the scheme as "Canada's shame," Adams described the Three Gorges project as a "Stalinist-scale forced resettlement operation."

"We would never tolerate this kind of thing in Canada.

"And to make excuses for forcibly relocating people in another country who do not want to be resettled is just a disgrace," Adams said.

Even the World Bank, often criticized by environmentalists for its so-called "edifice complex", has warned that the Chinese government's plan for the Yangtze River is not an "economically viable proposition."

And the United States Bureau of Reclamation, one of the world's foremost dam construction agencies, has withdrawn support for Three Gorges, concluding it is not "environmentally or economically feasible."

Even some Chinese experts oppose the project, arguing that massive amounts of silt from the Yangtze will build up behind the dam, eventually crippling its ability to produce electricity and protect communities from flooding.

The project has also emerged as a significant international human rights issue — one now likely to put additional pressure on Chrétien to defend his contention that trade and foreign investment should not be linked to human rights issues in Third World countries.

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Update

The issue: China's Three Gorges dam project has been described as requiring a 'Stalinist-scale forced resettlement' for an environmentally risky venture.

What's new: The Liberals, who in opposition spoke out against the project, now support Canadian participation.

An internal-security document prepared for Chinese authorities and leaked recently to the New York-based Human Rights Watch/Asia group, reveals that a crackdown has already begun against local villagers protesting forced resettlement, and calls for harsh measures to deal with protests.

A Canadian firm is seeking involvement in the relocation process. Monenco AGRA Inc. wants loan guarantees from the federal Export Development Corp. to help China finance a $35-million supercomputer to co-ordinate the resettlement of villagers who stand to lose their homes under the Three Gorges plan.

"I can easily see the entire region becoming a police state within a police state," Robin Munro, Hong Kong director for Human Rights/Asia, said last month.

Earlier this year, a World Bank study disclosed that more than 30 million Chinese citizens have been evicted from their homes since the 1950s — including 150,000 still living in "temporary shelters" 30 years after being moved from one dam site in northern China.

Addressing the UN's World Population Conference in Cairo in September, Citizenship and Immigration Minister Sergio Marchi declared that when it comes to the issue of involuntary migration, achieving balance "between compassion and control, between migration and the right to live in your homeland" are critical.

Meanwhile, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), says promoting better understanding "of the impact of population dynamics on progress towards sustainable development" is one of its main population policy objectives.

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