

Assembly of the Poor is the strongest peoples' organization in Thailand, with one of its roots in the struggle against the World Bank-funded Pak Mun dam, completed in 1994, which displaced at least 600 families from their villages, starved the river of fish, and gave the people meagre and unfertile lands in recompense. Primarily fisher-folk, fishing was a deep part of their culture and the basis for their livelihoods. As a result of displacement by the dam, many were forced to join the ranks of the destitute in Bangkok. Dam-affected villagers have never given up their fight, and have fuelled Thailand's dynamic anti-dam movement which also opposes the Rasi Salai dam further down the Pak Mun river, among others.

They have also fuelled a wider movement against globalization made up of all those, rural and urban, left out of the Thai economic 'miracle'. On 25 January 1997, the Assembly of the Poor made a huge impression on the Thai political imagination when 20,000 dam-affected villagers, small farmers, and fisher-folk erected a makeshift 'Village of the Poor' of plastic shacks which stretched back nearly a mile down the Nakhon Pathom Road outside Government House in Bangkok. A spanner in the works of the globalization project, they camped there in the stink of the smog and the traffic for 99 days, growing vegetables illegally along the banks of the city's river.

Then in 1998, international speculators betting against south east Asian currencies, caused the economy to go into free fall, revealing that Thailand's prosperity was built like a house of cards. The Government bowed to resulting austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), belts tightened and unemployment soared.

So in 1998 the village came again, this time to join the coalition of protest movements against the IMF, and protests and resistance have continued ever since against structural targets of globalization such as the WTO and the Asian Development Bank.

Power Generation: the protest villages of Thailand

by Velcrow Ripper

Pak Mun Dam, Thailand, July 2000

In the soft gold of magic-hour an old man is weaving a fishing net that will catch few fish. Behind him is the metal mesh of a chain-link fence emblazoned with the Thai words, "Danger! High Voltage!" and the silhouette of a man killed by the misuse of power. Inside the fence stand the hulking transformers connected to the turbines of the dam, the dam that destroyed the old man's village. High-tension power-lines stretch off to massive pylons disappearing into the distance, taking the electricity to the city. A meagre output – the dam delivers a fraction of what it was supposed to, and then only in the rainy season.

But the actual productivity of a dam is rarely the issue. The World Bank contributes a generous loan, contractors get fat, everyone at the top of the food chain benefits – at least until it's time to pay off the debt. The government can feel a step closer to joining the exclusive club of 'developed' nations.

And the price? Incalculable. The loss of a way of life for a people, the loss of life for countless species. And for some, that existed only here in the Mun River, the greatest loss, extinction. Worse than mere death: the end of birth.

The first towering metal pylon rises above a new village, Mae Mun Yuen One, Mother Mun Protest Village Number One, Thailand's first protest village. Six thousand villagers are

spread around the land surrounding the dam in thatched roofed bamboo huts built on stilts. They've been here for 15 months. The numbers keep growing, their spirit of resistance strengthening with time, not weakening as the officials hoped. Instead, the shacks are spreading out, gaining more ground in a nonviolent wave of people power. It has become an autonomous zone, attracting like-minded people from across the country, from around the world. The state does not enter here. Taxes are not collected, laws are applied by the community. There are refugees from the military dictatorship in Burma, landless peasants from the Cambodian border, activists from Canada, Australia, India, here in solidarity, to offer their bodies, to receive shelter, to learn from the strength of this movement. The wave of resistance is spreading throughout Thailand, which is now witness to more than 200 protests a year.

A diverse spectrum of factory workers, fisher-folk, students, landless farmers, urban poor, all those affected by so-called 'development', have banded together under an enormous umbrella group called the Assembly of the Poor. Throughout the camp hand-silk-screened red or yellow flags

proudly proclaim "Poor!" in Thai and English. The Assembly was born in 1997 from a protest encampment of 20,000 people in the centre of Bangkok. That moment gave a focus and unity to the movement which still resonates in Thailand today, the way Seattle sends out waves of inspiration.

The struggle against the Pak Mun Dam has been going on since 1990. Initially the Electricity Generating Agency of Thailand (EGAT), ran into a snag: the dam site was located on national park land. That was easily worked around – the staff of EGAT simply had themselves declared park rangers. They were merely improving the park. They moved in and began blasting away the 50 rapids of the Mun River – the spawning beds for the fish, the fish the villagers depended on for their lives. What was once a parking lot for the dam's visitor centre is now the headquarters for the dam protest. Sentries sit next to a bamboo gate which is raised and lowered with the help of a makeshift pulley system. Standing guard on one side of the gates, a giant fish trap towers up 20 feet, woven from reeds, a long slender cone. It was used to capture a single fish, the giant dinosaur fish that lived only in the Mun

closure of 130 community projects, and a 22 per cent rise in council tax. George McNeillage of the North Pollock Community Council says, "We have as much right as the councillors to be in this building; they were voted in two years ago in a stand against cuts and redundancies. Now they have betrayed every citizen of Glasgow and should resist or resign."

>> **April** >> One of Britain's last colonies, the tiny

island of St Helena, goes into open revolt against its dictatorial British Governor, setting the island's only police van on fire.

>> **April** >> A large white tent is erected in Buenos Aires. It will play host to 1,500 teachers on a rotating liquid diet strike, and to more than 5,000 personalities and 3 million supporters. Known as the 'White Tent of Dignity', it is erected by a teachers' union as part of a

campaign for an increase in funding to guarantee the future of the Argentinean public education system. Within a few weeks, however, the tent far exceeds this original purpose, and becomes the focus for other popular demands – and eventually the symbol of a social movement opposed to the spread of official neoliberal policies. Other 'white tents' spring up around the country.

River. Now they live nowhere on earth.

In the centre of the paved lot, in a little green island, is a bronze coloured statue of three life-sized human figures, two kneeling on the ground, another standing proud with fist raised to the sky in a gesture of defiance. A sign reads "Monument to the Poor". There is a stage with speaker system and microphones hooked up to loudspeakers and a bamboo hut on stilts that is the nerve centre of the operation. Inside I am surprised to see a fax machine, a couple of computers, and a line of cell phones charging. Political posters adorn the walls – a dove impaled on a machine gun, commemorating the anniversary of the students massacred in 1992. Another photo from the student massacre of 1976. A soldier in the foreground, holding a rifle, and hundreds of students lying on the ground with their hands behind their heads. A batik painting of the Village of the Poor, electricity pylon rising in the centre, bamboo huts spread out around the hillside.

Morning, and we gather on the deck of the big house to eat sticky rice, fish paste, and a basket of greens harvested from the river, seated on a woven reed mat under the shadow of the enormous pylon. EGAT, the village dog, comes sniffing around hoping for hand-outs. People love to say, "Bad EGAT!" to him. Poor dog, stuck with the moniker of the enemy.

I meet Pon, who has been an activist for over a decade, though he is only 30. He was beaten and arrested in the early years of the struggle to save the Mun and thrown in

"Rivers and forests on which the survival of rural families depend have been plundered from the people... the collapse of agricultural society forces people out of their communities to cheaply sell their labour in the city... The people must set up the country's development direction. The people must be the real beneficiaries of development." – Assembly of the Poor, 1997

jail along with many other activists. Ugly scars on his chest bear witness to the severity of the beatings he received. While on that action he met a young woman, a passionate, committed activist like himself. She was also arrested, and though they couldn't see each other, they began sending notes sent back and forth and a courtship began. Soon after their release they were married, and now they share their lives together as activists.

Paolo is a young boy of 14. He's a skinny little guy with crazy tousled hair, a high nasal voice, and sparkling eyes. He generally runs around shirtless and shoeless, with long baggy shorts that almost reach his ankles. Without any hesitation, he'll grab a megaphone at the daily demos and launch into a passionate speech. He first came to a protest

when he was seven. Paolo is focused, determined. "This river is not for me, myself but for all people everywhere and in the future too," he says. "Everyone uses the river. No one is an owner. No one owns the forest. So I'd like to tell everybody who can see this that they should look out for nature. In our free time what do we do? We go out and have fun. We waste time. We should use this time to educate ourselves on what is the actual situation. What is the effect of these mega-projects. We're still kids. Not long from now we will grow up. Our children, our grandchildren gonna have children. They'll have children and are they gonna see that nature returns?"

I hop on back of a motorcycle with Pon and a Filipino-American media activist named Cray. We speed along the broad paved road and out onto the dam crest.

On 15 May 2000, a year after the establishment of the protest village, the villagers awoke at 2.00 am and made their way here to the fence, blocking the dam itself. There was only one guard in his little house by the gate that night, asleep. Unbeknownst to him, he was also locked inside. The villagers,

young and old, carrying reed mats and pots of food, scaled the fence and began running across the crest of the dam. High above the water rushing through unseen turbines, past the surveillance cameras, to a second gate. Again they climbed, and they were in! The gate was cut and a sound system on a truck pulled in, blasting out traditional Thai music. The villagers danced ecstatically while the sun slowly rose.

Today the protest village extends along the entire top of the dam. The fishermen climb down the catwalks above the turbines and string out their nets to catch a few of the meagre remnants of fish that still swim the river. It's a startling juxtaposition of the villagers with their traditional nets against the metal and concrete monolith of the dam. At night guitars around campfires strum out protest songs: "I'm tired, but I'm still fighting..."

Rasi Salai dam

One day I climb into the back of a pick-up truck with Sikyamet, an activist with the South East Asia Rivers Network, for a two hour drive south, down to the site of *Mae Mun Yuen* Protest Villages – Numbers Two, Three, and Eight

>> **April 12** >> In Cutral-Có and Plaza Huincol, south-west Argentina, protest flares into outright rebellion when police attack a protest of unemployed workers and fatally shoot Teresa Rodríguez, a 24-year-old domestic worker. Roads are blocked with barricades and burning tyres, preventing police reinforcements from entering the city at several strategic points. "This is Chiapas," says a frightened police chief as he orders

his forces to withdraw and the government is forced to send aid packages and work subsidies to the area.

>> **April 12** >> The March for Social Justice takes place on the eve of the general election in London, UK, demanding a repeal of the Criminal Justice Act, the reinstatement of jobs and union privileges for sacked workers, and more. It is organized by a unique alliance between Reclaim the Streets, the

Liverpool Dockers, Women of the Waterfront, and the Hillingdon Hospital Workers. The original plan of squatting government buildings is foiled by police, but 20,000 people march through London and end up enjoying what the music media describe as "the best illegal rave or dance music party in history". The radical coalition is clearly a threat to the authorities; police confiscate all printed propaganda

– which surround the Rasi Salai Dam, another blockage downstream on the Mun River. We pass a long row of deserted concrete buildings high on stilts – the houses the government had built in hopes of enticing the villagers away from the protest site. No-one had taken the bait, and the houses, surrounded by infertile soil, sit empty.

Now the reservoir of the Rasi Salai dam stretches before us, murky water, remains of a forest rising up from its depths, dead trees, twisted forms against a threatening sky. This dam was ostensibly built to provide irrigation to the surrounding fields. Unfortunately, the land contains underground repositories of salt – a legacy of the distant past when this land was a sea bed – and the water of the reservoir became salinized, useless for agriculture. The government did an environmental impact assessment, the villagers later told me, after the completion of the dam. They were able to laugh at this incredible stupidity when they told me, though it was the ruin of their lives. They have encountered nothing but lies and manipulation by the dam builders, who would prefer them to conveniently disappear. But they will not disappear. Instead, they have made their presence well-known, constructing a protest village in the middle of the reservoir, above the flooded land that was once their homes. They have spent nine months living in this makeshift village, perched on stilts, waters slowly rising around them.

We climb into the middle of a long dug-out, sat cross-legged on a flat platform of woven reeds, and push out into the water. Our smiling boat driver starts up the outboard

engine and lowers the propeller, jutting six feet out the back of the boat at the end of a long metal shaft. We glide past lily pads dotted with lotus flowers. Purple tinged white. The lotus is a Buddhist symbol of awakening. It emerges from the mud of existence, but is unstained, only strengthened, fed. For the villagers, there can be no compensation for the loss they have experienced. Yet, they have had to plumb their depths for previously unknown strength, to stand up and fight, and have learned to fight without violence. To live in unity, united in their opposition, supported around the country, and gradually learning that they are part of a much larger community, coming to understand the greater world of resistance, in the face of the greater world of repression.

After 20 minutes we pass four outhouses sheltered by tarpaulin atop a little island. Soon we enter ‘water world’: a collection of thatched roofed huts with bamboo walls and floors, interconnected with precarious one-plank walkways high above the water. Outside many of the huts, ancient dug-out canoes bob in the murky water. We pull up to the big house and hoist ourselves up onto a catwalk. We remove our shoes as we step onto an open bamboo platform covered with a thatched roof. In the centre of the room a large brown painting depicts three men in uniforms holding aloft a huge scroll which represents the constitution of the country. Around them are the faces of peasants, in their conical woven straw hats, or wearing bandannas emblazoned with revolutionary symbols. The boots of one of the uniformed men rests firmly atop the head of a peasant man.

The villagers stand up to their waist in the water, the rising waters threatening to drown them, as it has drowned their very way of life. Their hands are raised in prayer position as they enact their morning ritual of thanks to the river, of apology to the river, of thanks to the Buddha. Each night, another ceremony is dedicated to their brothers and sisters in the struggle at the Narmada Dam in India. We slowly drift towards them in a dug out canoe as they chant in front of their sinking village, past the lines of committed faces, ending in silence, hands in prayer position, standing unmoving in the water that was their land. They don't spend all day standing in the water, just each morning, and night. The fact is, however, that the villagers are prepared to drown. They will not leave unless the dam is decommissioned. A similar protest is held at the Narmada dam site at monsoon time. Villagers chain themselves to their original homes as the waters rise, determined to drown until they are removed by force.

Early morning, we're gliding above the flooded land in a long dug out canoe that needs constant bailing. "This is

where the forest was," say the villagers accompanying me. They point to dead twisted trees rising from the murky water. Eerie silence. "The sound of the birds used to accompany us on our walks. There were deer, wild chickens. We would gather herbs and mushrooms." Through the light rain, threatening clouds reflect on a glassy surface. "We believe that there is a spirit in everything, in the forest, in the river. We call the forest grandfather. The river is female." Running parallel to us is another boat filled with villagers. In the bow of our boat, an old woman with wrinkled face and betel-nut-stained teeth sits in contemplation, her gnarled hands weaving reed into basket. Hours pass. In the distance, through the skeletal trees draped in seaweed, the Rasi Salai Dam appears, disappears, re-appears. The little engine of the boat is the only sound in the dead calm of the stagnant water, stopped up by the slowly approaching monstrosity.

Colourful tents become visible atop the dam, the tents of the protest village, Mae Mun Yuen Number Eight. "A few days after the protesters at Pak Mun dam took over their dam crest, we did the same thing, marching from the first

and try to frame people with the "attempted murder" of a policeman.

>> **April 17** >> The streets of Brasilia, capital of Brazil, are lined with 120,000 people to welcome thousands of Brazilian landless (MST) ending a two month march from São Paulo to demand land-reform and protest against the violent clampdown on their movement, arriving on International Peasant Farmers' day, the one-

year anniversary of the massacre.

>> **April 28** >> Two factories of workers making Nike shoes for subcontractors near Jakarta, Indonesia, go on strike separately on consecutive weeks to demand a ten per cent wage increase.

>> **May** >> Throughout the month protests against unemployment and privatization take place in numerous provincial towns of Argentina. In Libertador

General San Martín, where unemployment is over 33 per cent, the highway is blocked for three days and police attack with rubber bullets. Defending the police, Argentina's President declares, "I am not going to allow them to block my highways. This is a legitimate and democratic government."

>> **May 20** >> In La Plata, Argentina, police provoke rioting by removing street vendors. After occupying the

protest village, along the road, to the gates of the dam. We waited for the news from Pak Mun and when we saw that they hadn't been arrested, we too climbed the fence and took over this dam," a villager explains, laughing. We drift parallel to the massive impassive grey concrete of the dam with its incongruous cavalcade of fabric from the protesters sprouting from the crest. There are 700 protesters at this site, many of them the original villagers. The sound of water rushing through the partly opened gates reverberates. We pull up to an enormous concrete-covered slope, and hop out of the boat, scrambling up to the camp above.

A man in army fatigues walks through the lines of tents, shouting through a megaphone, calling people to their daily meetings. Sykamet explains that "the larger group is split into a number of smaller groups, and every day they get together in meetings to discuss problems, discuss strategy. Each group is of about ten to twenty people." Like the concept of affinity groups, smaller autonomous groups within the larger community.

From the dam, fisherfolk hang nets 100 feet down to the rushing water to try and snare the few fish that make it through. Stretching away from the dam, Pak Mun takes on the appearance of a river once again – though what I am seeing can no longer be accurately described as a river. Scientists would call it "reservoir outflow", a sadly depleted echo of its former existence. The water coming from the reservoir is severely de-oxygenated, and much of the usual life cannot survive.

Further down the road, near the gate they had scaled a

"Gleaming there and humming, [the dam] stands like a very talisman of change, a miraculous intrusion, as though its engineers have flown down from Mars itself and brought their anvils with them." – James Morris, *The Road to Huddersfield*, here commenting on World Bank-funded Bhumipol dam in Thailand in a book commissioned by the World Bank, 1964

month earlier, a group of villagers are busy digging a tunnel. They have decided to take matters into their own hands, and with picks, shovels, and their bare hands, are creating a channel through the road, to drain the reservoir, and return the Mun river to its old course. Fifty villagers, men and women, young and old, are toiling in the heat of the sun, on both sides of the road and have already succeeded in making an appreciable dent in the artificial earthen mound. Four men in longs, stripped to the waist, stand in the mucky water of the reservoir, chopping into the red clay with energy. A huge banner hangs along the roadside above proclaiming, "Assembly of the Poor". A man with a megaphone paces back and forth, urging the workers on. After about half an hour, the exercise is terminated for the day, and villagers return to the camp, in two orderly rows of men and women.

The whole day I find myself smiling broadly, invigorated

by the feeling of resistance and solidarity in the air. These people are not content to sit quiet and be victimized. They are standing up. Chances of the dam being completely decommissioned are slim. But they will always know that they fought, they did not allow themselves to be silently, meekly transformed into yet another poverty-stricken community, tribal people dependent on the government for handouts.

UPDATE: Since 2000, the protest villages and marches have successfully pressured the government into opening the sluice gates of the Pak Mun dam to let fish through. As a result, for the first time in the ten years since the dam was built, a single giant fish, thought to be extinct, has been seen in the river, and fishing has resumed. A ground-breaking study of villagers' ecological knowledge of the river's ecosystem has done much to raise the issue of rural participation and knowledge in development, and public understanding of the ecological and social issues involved.

However, the villagers continue to face serious crackdown – in January 2003 one of the protest villages was

burned down by a gang of unidentified thugs. International campaigners are pressuring the World Bank to remove funding for the dam.

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Resources:

- » **The International Rivers Network supports local communities working to protect their rivers and watersheds:** www.irn.org
- » **A multimedia website documenting a long term project documenting scared and sacred places of the world:** www.scaredsacred.org

TV station, vendors seek refuge in the university where students protect them against mounted police charges, though many are injured. In Buenos Aires, outraged students hold rush hour actions in solidarity, blocking major avenues at five key points and organizing teach-ins and rallies. As they march, they are greeted with confetti raining down from balconies and cheers from the local residents.

>> June 8 >> The first (known) action against GMOs in Britain takes place outside of Cambridge. Activists stage a rousing game of cricket with a test crop of GM potatoes, destroying the entire crop.

>> June 14 >> The European march against unemployment, job insecurity and social exclusion converges in Amsterdam, Netherlands, arriving from all points in Europe and culminating with a demonstration

of 50,000 during the EU summit. Several thousand Italian activists commandeer a train from Italy to Amsterdam. Throughout the course of the summit, 750 people are arrested, in the largest mass arrests in the Netherlands since 1966.

>> June 19 >> The McLibel case, England's longest ever trial, ends after 314 days. McDonald's was suing two activists for handing out leaflets criticizing the