

China presses Three Gorges project to heed rules

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BEIJING, Feb 1 (Reuters) - China's environmental watchdog, flexing its limited muscles to try to clean up industry, may take the operators of the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydroelectric project, to court, state media said on Tuesday.

The State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) has told the state-owned Yangtze River Three Gorges Project Development Corp. it must heed an order to halt construction at three new projects or face fines and legal penalties.

The warning, posted on SEPA's Web site, www.zhb.gov.cn, was sent after initial administration calls for work at the sites to stop were ignored, the Beijing News said.

In mid-January, SEPA ordered the suspension of construction at 30 major infrastructure projects around China, most of them in the power sector, because they had flouted a law requiring environmental impact assessments before work began.

"Eight projects, including Three Gorges Corp's Xiluodu station on the upper Yangtze River, the underground power station at the Three Gorges Dam and the Three Gorges project power supply station, have not followed the orders," the Beijing News said.

But the environmental watchdog may have more bark than bite in the matter, an environmental law expert said.

"SEPA can apply for a court order, but because the case would be handled by a local court, it would be very difficult for such an order to be issued," Wang Canfa, a professor at the China University of Political Science and Law, was quoted as saying.

Historically, the central government has struggled to implement policies, especially those concerning the environment, at the local level.

"Many localities ... go ahead with construction even if the green light is not given," Xinhua news agency said.

The order should not affect an original plan to add 15 generators to the 11 currently operating at the Three Gorges Dam.

Three Gorges Corp. declined to comment on the matter when contacted by Reuters on Tuesday.

SEPA's orders have come in the midst of a crippling national power crunch driven by China's explosive economic growth, which hit 9.5 percent in 2004.

Chinese leaders have acknowledged that the acceleration of economic development has inflicted considerable damage on the environment, but they have kept preservation of a strong economy their main priority.