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A BRIDGE TOO FAR

Many local residents are still not convinced the project will take off

Story by NAOWARAT SUKSAMRAN and SUBIN KHEUNKAEW

Upon hearing the news that the cabinet had approved construction of a new Thai-Lao bridge over the Mekong River in Chiang Khong district, residents living around the bridge site responded with delight, convinced that the news would further boost land prices in the area.

China has agreed to share the 1.09-billion-baht construction cost of the 400-metre-long bridge with Thailand under the Greater Mekong Sub-region scheme.

The bridge, if constructed, will link Chiang Rai's Chiang Khong district and Houayxay, the capital of Bokeo province in Laos.

But many in Chiang Khong district are still not convinced the government would implement the project.

"Will they really do it? We've heard about the project since the Chatichai Choonhavan government. We hear about the plan every now and then, but we've never seen the construction take off," said a resident of Don Mahawan community, which is adjacent to the bridge site on the Thai side.

"And the government that has approved its construction is an interim one, not a permanent government," said another resident.

News about its planned construction has influenced the lives of local residents significantly over the past decade as land prices in communities around the bridge site, including the nearby Pak Ing Nua community, have steadily gone up.

In those communities, the land is sold at between 400,000 and 500,000 baht per rai, while the land closer to the Mekong River bank can fetch up to one million baht per rai.



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A tour operator in Chiang Khong said before the Chatichai Choonhavan government came up with the plan, land prices in Chiang Khong were only ranging between 4,000 and 5,000 baht per rai.

Tempted by soaring land prices following the announcement of the bridge project by the Chatichai regime, most of the Don Mahawan and Pak Ing Nua residents then sold off their land to outsiders and turned themselves into tenants on the same plots.

"I sold my land five years ago at 40,000 baht per rai," said 66-year-old Sa-nguan Khamtan.

After selling his six-rai plot, he bought a car and gave the rest of the money to his children.

Like his neighbours, he now lives on the six-rai plot he rents from the same person he sold the land to.

Panya Taengmo, another Don Mahawan resident, said whenever there is news that the government will soon build the bridge, land prices in his community shoot up again and then drop a bit after there is no sign of actual construction.

Khamphan Thammawong, who runs a large business selling decorative stones in the neighbourhood, said his family members are snapping up more land after hearing the latest construction plan. Right now he owns more than three rai of land next to the river bank himself.

Mr Khamphan believes the construction plan is for real this time as the Lao government has already expropriated land around the bridge site on the Lao side.

According to the tour operator, most owners of land around the bridge site are local and national politicians.

However, some have purchased large land plots on behalf of Chinese business operators keen to build warehouses near the bridge.

Prayuth Phothi, the Don Mahawan village headman, said 70% of the residents in his community have already sold their land.

The locals make a living by collecting stones from the Mekong River and selling them as decorative stones for landscaping.

Mr Prayuth said there is also a plan to build an industrial estate on a 16,000-rai plot in Tambon Sri Donmool, which would help to create more jobs.

Since the collecting of stones from the river for sale is illegal, the bridge would make it easier for law enforcement authorities to see residents that are collecting stones from the river, said Mr Prayuth.

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