

The South-North Water Diversion Project has cut thousands of relocated villagers adrift, with little or no compensation and substandard replacement housing, as local officials rush to complete the colossal task. **Shi Jiangtao** reports.

# Sold down the River

Li Changshuan had high hopes for life in new Yaoliawan, but the village he had called home, old Yaoliawan. But it took only three months in his freshly built, government-sponsored house for cracks and fissures to appear in the walls and on the terrace floors. Now, less than a year and a half later, reinforcing steel bars poke through eroded concrete on the terrace roof and the house appears to be sinking.

"It doesn't take an expert to [identify] serious construction quality problems," the 47-year-old says. Similar problems can be seen in 90 per cent of the homes in the village. In the

suburbs of Nanyang city, Henan province, built to house some of the hundreds of thousands of people who have been relocated to make way for the South-North Water Diversion Project. The flaws have triggered a major panic among Yaoliawan's more than 700 residents. They're outraged at what they call perfect examples of the shoddy construction that's all too common on the mainland - or, as they call them, "pork" projects. "My house looks like a stone," says villager Cheng Cunli, 71. Substandard building materials, lax government control and a prevailing culture of corruption; villagers blame all these for the poor state of their new homes. When they tried to complain, local officials denied anything was amiss. Hongnwan township authorities even jailed for 15 days two villagers who dared to petition the Nanyang city government. The controversy is the latest in a long list of headaches the developers of the water diversion scheme have had to cope with: sharply rising costs, pollution woes, unfair resettlement compensation and intense bickering among local authorities over how

to divide up limited water allocations have all played a part.

Beijing has pushed the mammoth project - the world's largest water-distribution scheme - to quench the thirst of the parched north of the country. But the daunting ecological, social and economic implications have caused critics to openly doubt the leadership's assertion that the project is a viable solution to the country's looming water crisis. The PRC's Three Gorges Project, designed to channel some 50 billion cubic metres of water each year from the Yangtze River and its tributaries northwards along three routes, in western, central and eastern China, has been under way since 2002. But opposition has been growing and reached an crescendo last year, when the Yangtze River and one of its major tributaries, the Han, were hit by one of the mainland's worst droughts. Water levels fell to a record low behind the Danjiangkou Dam, on the Han River, the source for the central route, raising fresh doubts about the rationale and feasibility of sending up to 14.7 billion cubic metres of water a year up that route - as much as one-third of the river's annual flow.

Cover story



Du Xijuan (far right) with his son, Shipeng (centre), and other family members in their home in Qingfeng village, Henan province, on June 17, the day before they moved.

But after several failed attempts to fix the leaks, the officials gave up and stopped visiting the village, says Cheng. Many villagers say they are too frightened to take their complaints further after local cadres threatened to punish those who complained to "cause trouble". They are aware of what happened to Li, one of two villagers detained in May. Before that, Li says, local police had tried to intimidate and dissuade him from taking his grievances to higher authorities. "I know I've done nothing wrong to seek justice through petition, so I refused to back down," he says. Besides, I am not just fighting for myself, I am fighting for the villagers who suffer from the same problems."

It is bitter that local authorities didn't even bother to justify his detention with a warrant or any other legal document. "Why should I be punished for doing the right thing?" He tried to petition the Nanyang city government about the substandard houses and local authorities' inaction. His petition was accepted, but nothing more happened. Then he tried the provincial government, with the same result. He now plans to petition in Beijing.

"It may not work. But who else can I turn to when my life has been ruined here and the government refuses to help?" he asks. Li Jianzhong, 38 (unrelated to Li Changshuan), another of the few Yaoliawan residents who dare to go on record with their grievances, says villagers won't give up fighting for their rights. "We've been petitioning for years and we made sacrifices to support the national priority project at the request of the [Communist] Party and government," Li says. "But why should we be left to suffer? Were we wrong for taking their words seriously?"

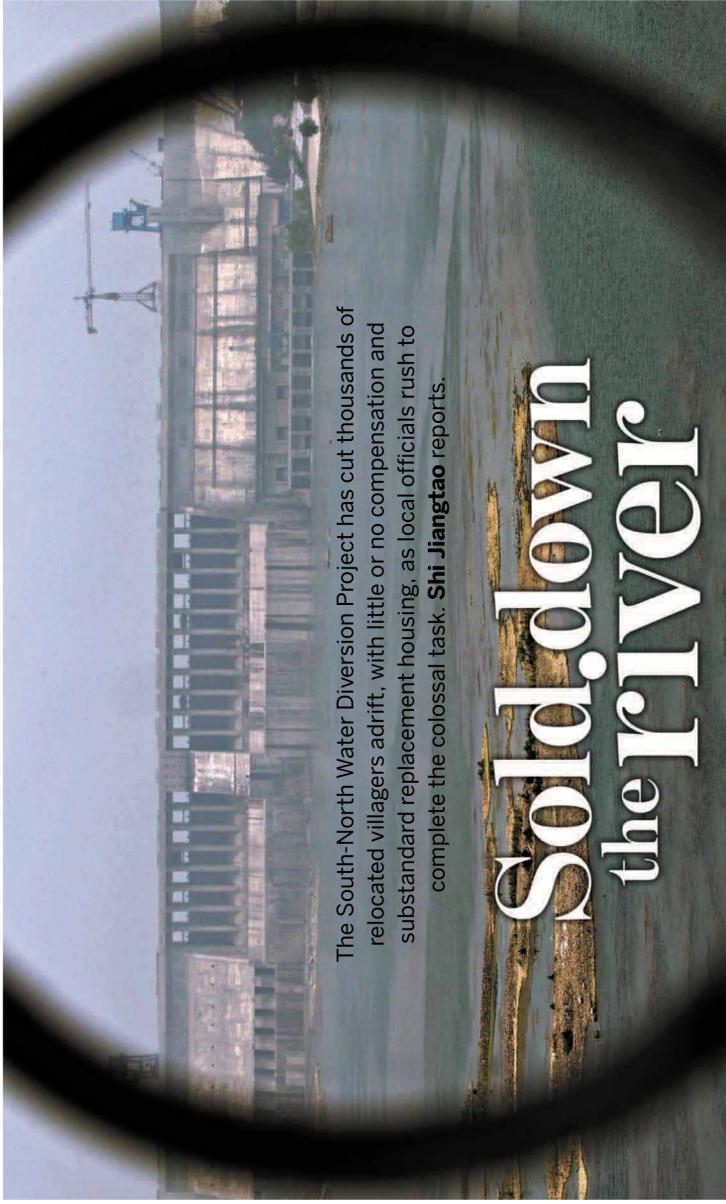
**DU XIJUAN** AND his family were among the 800 people, half the population of Qingfeng village, in Xichuan, who chose to move the 200 kilometres to Hongnwan resettlement village a few months ago. Half of the villagers had to relocate and those who did were promised new homes as part of the resettlement deal.

tensions and jeopardise the future of the project, intricate controversies that surrounded construction of the Three Gorges Dam.

Top mainland water-resources officials have admitted that this resettlement has been much more challenging than that of the Three Gorges. Although the world's largest dam project displaced a total of 1.4 million people, it took 17 years to complete. Despite that acknowledgment, Beijing still decided to wrap up the scheduled four-year resettlement scheme in two years - a desperate attempt to make up for time lost to delays and setbacks. Although grievances are increasing and opposition stiffening, the Beijing Water Authority confirms the plan remains to see water from the Danjiangkou Dam flowing into the capital in 2014. Analysts say Beijing's discussion with pace and quantity over everything else helps explain why the past two years have seen a soaring number of petitions and protests.

Top leaders, including President Hu Jintao last year and made pledges about ensuring the lawful rights of the displaced. But local officials, caught between Beijing's demanding deadline and growing public dissatisfaction, have had little option other than to push residents hard. Such top-down political pressure will subsequently make it more difficult for distraught people to voice their grievances. That, in turn, will fuel further distrust of authorities and more tensions, critics warn. In Hubei's Qianjiang city, thousands of people displaced by the project took to the streets in November 2010, protesting over shoddy built houses and unfair compensation. "Violence erupted when armed police tried to break up the protests and tear down the banners. Du's his fellow villagers were ordered to despair by the attitude of local authorities. The shoddy workmanship did not come entirely as a surprise for Du, who had volunteered for a month as a quality inspector when Hongnwan village was being built. "I noticed quite a number of irregularities during construction work," he says, "with developers having skimped on time and building materials to make greater profits. I was told at that time that such things are quite common throughout the building of resettlement villages."

Critics have long warned against haste in the resettlement programme. They say such approach invokes hard feelings, exacerbates



risks associated with tunnelling through the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

The 130-billion yuan eastern route, which will pump about 15 billion cubic metres of water a year through the polluted Grand Canal, between Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, and Beijing, has been postponed several times because of pollution concerns and funding shortfalls. A Xinhua report in 2009 revealed that the eight-year-old project has a total of 14,400-kilometre canal is built to carry at least 10 billion cubic metres of water from the Danjiangkou Dam to Beijing every year, has more than doubled, to 200 billion yuan. Even if the price tag for the entire scheme were the same as initially budgeted, it would dwarf that of the world's most expensive infrastructure project to date - the Three Gorges Dam, officially billed at 200 billion yuan. Of all the challenges facing the project, the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of people has proved to be the most arduous. More than 400,000 people, mostly in Henan and Hubei provinces and along the central route, are thought to have been displaced in an

ambitious two-year resettlement scheme that, according to Xinhua, finished at the end of last year. Three hundred and thirty thousand of them had been living around the Danjiangkou Reservoir, which straddles the provinces. In one county alone, Xichuan, on the southwestern border of Henan, more than 190,000 people have been displaced, including some who had been erected at least twice during the building of the reservoir. In the late 1990s, eight resettlement villages were built in the farmland in Xichuan will be inundated. Under pressure from Beijing's year-end deadline for wrapping up the resettlement scheme and a goal to have the project ready for water delivery in 2014, local authorities have consistently dismissed accusations over construction quality as isolated cases. Officials also appear indifferent to simmering grievances and have even sought to suppress widespread complaints through intimidation. Many people, across a vast rural area, feel betrayed by authorities who had repeatedly promised better lives after resettlement. When cracks began to appear in new Yaoliawan, officials at first promised to help. >>

We believe the central government had the best interests in mind in setting out the policies and their standards, but they ruined by corrupt local authorities."

Zheng and several other villagers are planning to travel to Beijing to petition the central government. "I hope Premier Wen can help us seek justice." Cuomiao villager Li Xijian lives on the southern bank of the Yellow River in Xingyang city, which is under the jurisdiction of the provincial capital, Zhengzhou. The village is now known for an amazing underground project that will divert water from the reservoir through two 19-kilometre tunnels to cross beneath the Yellow River.

Li, 51, and his wife were forced to move in 2007, when preparations for the four billion yuan tunnel project began.

"We didn't want to move because cadres had tried to talk us into it," he says. "They cut off electricity and water supply when we insisted on getting a compensation deal first. Eventually, we were literally dragged out of our homes by dozens of officials in charge of resettlement."

Worse, the couple had to borrow money to build a new home. And because they lost their farmland and inflation has raised prices, their living costs are a lot higher than they used to be, the couple say.

"Whenever we raised the issue of our compensation, local officials asked us to be patient and warned us not to take our grievances to Beijing," Li says bitterly.

"They said even if we had made sacrifices, there was no excuse for us to do anything, that could taint the local government's image." ■

Hopes villagers had of finding jobs at the massive dam expansion project were also dashed. Locals were not hired. Local authorities, including banks, have refused to grant loans to the poverty-hit villagers. To build their new houses and make a living, many people, including Yan's husband and son, have had to find temporary jobs, or borrow money from relatives and fellow villagers. Gaiwan compensation seems to be less than that of those who were displaced later.

"Many people in my village are on a monthly government salary of 150 yuan as the only income," Wang Hao says. "But how could it be possible for anyone to survive on 50 yuan a month?" Wang was one of the very few who were not allowed to leave their homes. "We know very senior officials come when they block all the roads and our village," Zhang Chengde says. "But what's the use of such visits when we don't even have a chance to meet them?" "Do they actually know what we have been through and how corrupt local officials turn a deaf ear to our sufferings?"

## Troubled waters

MOVING STORIES Shi Jiangtao

developers tried to seize a large chunk of their new farmland.

"The authorities said they needed more land to help a real estate company build a tourist pier," Yan says. "But how could we allow them to destroy our remaining farmland without receiving any compensation?"

For years, villagers tried to stop the land seizure. But their resistance crumbled because of the local government's threat of off the area and arrested 10 members of their number. Yan was one of them. She was briefly detained by police for allegedly disrupting social order. Her 10-day detention was halved to five days when authorities found that Yan was in poor health and had high blood pressure.

Zhang Chengde, 59, says yields from his new farmland were so meagre his family of eight got less than 200kg of wheat last year. Severe drought aggravated the situation.

"Although we live next to the big reservoir, we can't afford to buy water to irrigate," Zhang says. "For us, water under heavy debt."

Before the resettlement, Gaiwan had been one of the richest villages in the Danjiangkou city. But about 30,000 people have moved to other resettlement sites allocated to them after the move, however, waste ground.

"How could our fertile farmland and denied us proper compensation?" Yan asks tearfully. "What about our children and our children's children?"

Tensions between villagers and local authorities escalated in August 2010 when local government officials and property

Yan Zhiyun does not understand why her family has been abandoned after the North Water Diversion Project. After years of futile petitions, Yan says she has given up hope they will see justice.

"We had no problem at all in making sacrifices for the national project, which would alleviate drought in the capital, because we are poor farmers," Yan says. "But we have been abandoned."

Along with some 500 fellow villagers, Yan and her family moved into their new house in 2005. Her village, Gaiwan, on the Hubei side of the Danjiangkou Reservoir, was the first to be displaced by the water diversion project.

The South China Morning Post visited Yan, now 58, and her resettlement village in 2007. Back then, she and many fellow villagers complained their once abundant lives had been ruined almost overnight to make way for an expansion of the Danjiangkou Dam. Four years later, they are worse off. They have been plunged deeper into poverty and many are living under heavy debt.

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