

Iran's Farab starts construction of Puhulpola dam across Uma Oya



The Dyraaba dam, which is now over 80 per cent complete.

Construction of the Puhulpola dam, one of the main components of the multi-million dollar Uma Oya irrigation and power project has now started.

One of the biggest development and construction schemes in Sri Lanka, Uma Oya aims to provide much needed water for irrigation and industry in the dry southeast of the country.

The project consists of the Dyraaba and Puhulpola dams, which span the two main tributaries of the Uma Oya river, an underground hydro-electric power generation unit and some 23 km of tunnels. The tunnels will connect the dams and channel water to a power plant which will add 120 MW to Sri Lanka's electricity generation capacity.

Work on the Dyraaba dam is already around 80 percent complete and is scheduled to be completed in January 2017. Construction of the Puhulpola dam meanwhile has just begun.

"After conducting the geological and geotechnical studies of the area, we have begun the construction of the Puhulpola dam on the Uma Oya river," said Iranian power and water company Farab, which was awarded the contract to implement the project. The dam will stand 35 metres high and 175 metres wide.

Water Scarcity

Agriculture is one of the most important sectors of the Sri Lankan economy and people living in rural areas are heavily dependent on irrigated and rain-fed cultivation.

Rain in southeast Sri Lanka can be frustratingly scarce during

the dry season. While other parts of Sri Lanka benefit from two rainy seasons a year, the south-eastern dry zone has only one rainy season which lasts from October to March. Residents of this area are mainly reliant on agriculture for their income and water shortages are a big challenge.

According to the Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment, there are more than 30,000 hectares of agricultural land in the area that cannot be fully utilised due to water shortages and lack of irrigation.

"Through the Uma Oya project, not only can these lands be fully exploited but another 5,000 hectares of new land will be developed for cultivation," said Udaya R. Seneviratne, secretary to the ministry.

Duminda Srikantha, a farmer from Buduruwagala village said he and the other 400 families living there are looking forward to the day when the project is completed.

"We have no water source other than rain in this area," said the 42-year-old father of three. "That means we can only cultivate three months a year during the rainy season."

Duminda finds it very difficult to make ends meet, but hopes that things will improve once the project is operational.

"If there is enough water available, we can cultivate more paddy lands and earn more money," he said.

Concerns

While people like Duminda are excited about the project and hope

to benefit, some farmers living upside of Uma Oya project are worried that the diversion of water from the upstream rivers will not leave them with enough water for drinking and irrigating their fields. The project's executives said those fears are not well founded.

Project Director Dr. Eng. N. S. K. N de Silva said the diversion of the Uma Oya river will not create water shortages and that there would not be any potential adverse impact downstream of the Puhulpola and Dyraaba dams.

"Studies were carried out on the amount of water required by the residents of the upstream and only excess water would be diverted to the southern dry areas," said de Silva.

"If under very rare circumstances the downstream supply of water fails to fulfill the needs of inhabitants in the original zone, then the diversion of water will be halted," he said.

According to Chief Resident Engineer, Upul Goonasekara out of the 213 million cubic metres of water that flow through the Uma Oya river every year, only 145 million cubic metres will be diverted to the southeastern districts.

"The project will enhance the livelihood of the people in the downstream, without creating water shortages for the people living upstream of the tunnel," Goonasekara said.

Numerous development activities are expected to be carried out by the Sri Lankan government in southeastern districts such as Moneragala and Budulla once the Uma Oya project is completed.