

Danube dam project halted amid calls for referendum

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Susan Viets in Budapest

CONSTRUCTION of the controversial Nagymaros hydro-electric dam on the Danube will be halted for two months.

The announcement by the Hungarian Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Peter Medgyessy, follows parliament's decision in March to put the issue back on the agenda and to consider the possibility of a referendum on the dam.

In the May 30 session of parliament, the government will table a resolution to free it from its obligation to proceed with construction of the dam.

If parliament agrees, the project will be reassessed on the basis of scientific studies. If parliament votes against the government's proposals, it will have to decide whether or not to initiate a referendum on the dam.

Mr Janos Vargha, a leader of the Danube Circle environmental group, said he is "cautiously optimistic" after the government's announcement.

The Danube Circle is one of Hungary's alternative movements which has mobilised public pressure against construction of the dam.

Mr Vargha warned that the government is taking the attitude that "lay people" are not sufficiently well informed "to be burdened with the responsibility of voting on the dam in a referendum". The Danube Circle has long supported the call for a referendum.

The issue is complicated by international ties. The Nagymaros power station in Hungary is one of two dams in a larger water barrage system. The second dam is located in Czechoslovakia. The system is designed to generate maximum electricity when both dams are operating, so Czechoslovakia stands to lose if Hungary decides not to build its power station.

Austria is heavily involved in both financing and building the dam. Austrian loans are to be repaid in electricity.

The government announced this weekend that it is considering initiating talks with both Austria and Czechoslovakia.

The Danube Circle has sent its own "delegation of goodwill" to Austria and would like to send a similar team to Czechoslovakia.

Hungary's General Secretary, Mr Karoly Grosz, announced on May 1 that he favours pressing ahead with construction of the dam.

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