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WATER PROTESTS AGAINST VENICE DAM PROJECT BY DOMINIC STANDISH

(ANSA) - Venice, 13 September - Floating demonstrators have challenged preparations to protect Venice from sinking.

A colourful procession of 30 boats carrying 150 protestors blocked parts of Venice's Grand Canal for two hours in a weekend demonstration, snarling the local water bus service that residents and tourists rely on.

Placards held by demonstrators on the boats read 'No MOSE' - a reference to the biblical name given to the mobile barriers project to part the seas in Venice.

'MOSE' is also an acronym for Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico (experimental electro mechanic module), a prototype that was built to test how the barriers would operate.

After 30 years of debate and testing, the MOSE project was inaugurated by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in May 2003.

Seventy-nine barriers have been designed to rise from the seabed to block the lagoon from the Adriatic Sea when high tides are forecasted.

Although organisational work on the project has begun, there are still no signs of cranes or excavators at the Lido or Malamocco mouths to the lagoon where the barriers will be placed. Opponents of the dam project still believe they can stop its construction.

The demonstration on the Grand Canal was organised by many local and national environmental groups, including the conservationists Italia Nostra, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) and the green environment and society association (VAS).

There were also representatives from the Green, Democratic Left and Communist Refoundation political parties.

"MOSE will irreversibly change the view of the landscape and the geological, morphological and hydraulic structure of the port's mouths," said Sergio Torcinovich, a Communist Refoundation environmental delegate from the Lido municipal council.

The project has also drawn protests from the Association for the Defence of Venice's Embankments. The Association would prefer money to be spent on elevating pavements at the lowest and most vulnerable parts of the city, like one of the leading tourist attractions, St. Mark's Square.

"MOSE has already undermined the financial resources that guarantee complex protection activities, which include the raising of pavements at St. Mark's Square," said Salvatore Lihard, the Association's President.

The cost of MOSE has been estimated at 3.4 billion euros with completion expected in 2011. Debates about the environmental impact and the cost of the barrier system have led to numerous legal challenges and investigations.

But MOSE has been approved by the Veneto regional court (TAR), the Venice Water Authority, the Commission to Safeguard Venice and several teams of international experts.

Nevertheless, "it is important to continue these protests against MOSE", believes Paolo Cacciari, Venice's environmental councillor and a participant in the Grand Canal demonstration.

In fact, the organisations behind the event announced

the birth of a citizens committee against the mobile barriers.

But blocking the Grand Canal for a couple of hours may prove easier than blocking the project to occasionally close the entrances to Venice's lagoon.

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