

The Tirana prosecutor's office has launched an investigation into the hydropower plant being built on the Lengarica River in southern Albania, which is said to pose a threat to a canyon.

A spokesperson for Albania's General Prosecutor's office has told BIRN that prosecutors will review all the procedures over the award of a concession to an Austrian company to build a controversial hydro-power plant.

"All the people that might have knowledge of the project will be questioned as part of the investigation," Albi Serani said.

"The senior officials of the institution that awarded the concessionary contract will be among those questioned," he added.

A BIRN investigation in November revealed that the hydropower plant poses a serious environmental risk to the Lengarica River canyon in southern Albania.

The plant is being financed by the International Finance Corporation, IFC, the commercial arm of the World Bank, and is being built by Enso Hydro of Austria through a local subsidiary, Lengarica & Energy.

Documents obtained by BIRN and interviews with experts and government officials show that Lengarica & Energy's initial application for a permit was rejected because of its negative impact on the canyon and on the Hotova Pine national park.

An environmental permit for the project was ultimately approved, apparently following application of political pressure, however.

The canyon is a natural monument enjoying Category 1 protection status under Albanian law, "which does not allow for any sort of construction," Zamir Dedej, head of Albania's Institute for Nature Protection, recalled.

Enso Hydro admits that the plant is being constructed in a "sensitive" natural environment, but maintains that the work will have no impact on the canyon itself.

The company says that while it is using water that flows in the canyon, it is not actually building it inside the so-called Category 1 area.

It has also underlined that it received all the construction permits it needs from the government - and says it is up to the authorities to monitor compliance with the permits.

"We were aware that it was a sensitive area," Lengarica & Energy's director, Wolfgang Kropfl, said.

The World Bank, which controls 20 per cent of the project through its investment in Lengarica & Energy, says it reviewed the project under IFC Environmental Performance Standards criteria before deciding to finance it.

Source; BIRN