

The Mon Forum

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Some Acronyms In This Issue

FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
NMSP	New Mon State Party
LBI	Light Infantry Battalion
ID	Identification
TPP	Three Pagodas Pass
KNU	Karen National Union
POW	Prisoners of War
USDP	Union Peace and Development Council

News

Local people concerned about gas pipeline renovation

January 7, 2013

More than ten years ago, the construction of the 180-mile Yadana gas pipeline across the length of the southern peninsula of Burma, also called Myanmar, drew widespread condemnation for massive human rights violations. Branching off that controversial pipeline is a longer but lesser known gas line originating near Kanbawk in Tenasserim Region and ending in Myaing Kalay, Karen State. During its construction, over 2,400 acres of land were seized, for which villagers received little or no compensation.

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Digging to bury the gas pipeline

Report

Infrastructure projects signal reform and reservations on the border

In the past few months, two remarkable infrastructure projects have been planned for the areas extending north and west of Three Pagodas Pass on the Thai-Burmese border. The first entails rejuvenating a road that connects the border town to Kyainnseikyi, 53 miles to the north. The second project is part of a high-profile proposal to reconstruct a 60-mile section of the “Death Railway,” a World War II era rail line stretching 170 miles from Thanbyuzayat in Burma to Ratchaburi Province, Thailand.

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Investment law and people's rights in Burma

Burma, also known as Myanmar, is opening to democracy. A key factor in achieving a smooth democratization process is economic growth, but growth that relates exclusively to increased foreign investment and freer markets will not adequately alter the country's socioeconomic landscape. Burma requires investment that reaches across a wide range of sectors and benefits the millions of people who continue to live in poverty.

For more than two decades, Burma's people had no control over decisions made during foreign investment or regional business activities, despite the attendant impacts that directly affected their lives. Under military rule, agricultural lands were seized from farming families, dam and dike construction was implemented without residents' prior consent, and profits from natural resource extraction were carried off without boosting local economies. But people remained silent because they lacked the right to speak out.

Now, due to the democratic transition, people have been given fundamental rights in freedom of expression, association, and demonstration. On a weekly basis, we see poor farmers taking to the streets to publicize their discontent with land confiscation and local villagers demonstrating against forced relocation caused by large-scale investment projects.

The Union Parliament in Nay Pyi Daw has been thoroughly discussing and drafting a new foreign direct investment (FDI) law to attract foreign capital. While economic growth encouraged by foreign currency is desirable, members of parliament need to carefully consider how to guide investment to ensure sustainable development. FDI must not destroy local customs, traditional livelihoods, or the unique ecosystems of Burma, especially in the resource-rich areas home to large ethnic populations and regularly targeted by development companies. Instead, the government should steer investment toward job creation, capacity-building, and equitable growth.

Burma could count its lessons learned from controversial development projects as an advantage when determining the best course of action for future endeavors. The Myitsone Dam hydroelectric power project, the Dawei (Tavoy) deep seaport and industrial complex in southern Burma, and the Letpandaung copper mine have each been strongly opposed by local people who are unwilling to trade their social or environmental wellbeing for large-scale investment. The government must be certain that new development projects have minimal negative consequences and provide the greatest possible value to local people.

A truly democratic system requires transparency, with people empowered to access relevant information and to speak out for their communities and families. The local, state, and union governments are responsible for preventing conflict between investment interests and local residents, and for ushering in genuine democracy. ■

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Now, sections of the 12-year-old pipeline are undergoing restoration. Certain portions are being dug up and repaired, while others are being moved across streets or fields to straighten the trajectory of the pipe. The original pipeline was constructed parallel to the Ye to Mawlamine railway, but the updated segments are often being laid closer to the motorway between Thanbyuzayat and Mudon. In recent interviews, residents of roadside villages like Youndaung, Neepado, Kwonhlar, and Waethon Chaung expressed fear about the encroaching project that runs in front of homes, shops, and a local school.

In its 2009 report "Laid to Waste," HURFOM identified 10 major explosions that occurred along the Kanbauk to Myaing Kalay pipeline over its almost 10 years of operation, not including various leaks and minor problems.

People described living near the pipeline like "sitting on a time bomb" due to the frequency of ruptures. With each explosion, villagers could be injured or asked to pay for pipeline repairs or area security. Military authorities regularly placed the blame for the blasts on rebel attacks, accusing local civilians of involvement. While rebel groups were sometimes responsible for attacks on state-controlled development projects, there was also strong evidence that the explosions were accidents caused by poor engineering and faulty welding on pipeline joints.

For these reasons, residents worry that resumed construction on the pipeline may lead to familiar hazards and financial burden.

"We were very anxious when we saw that the workers were laying the gas pipeline in front of our house. Although we wanted to tell them not to do it here, we couldn't. They just continued to work and when there was a problem, they would not help us," said one villager.

Pipeline modifications began in early November 2012 and are planned to improve worn-out sections and extend the flow of gas to Yangon, requiring the acquisition of previously untouched land to bury new gas lines. Encouragingly, there have been no reports of forced labor since construction started. According to locals, construction workers are authorized to excavate land within 100 feet of the state-owned motorway, and the government has promised to compensate any land affected outside that boundary. In addition, while residents do not know the name of the private construction company managing the project, they said company representatives assured them that they would be compensated for seized land and would not have to pay for repairs like they did in the past.

But villagers claim they have been asked to provide sentry duty near the pipeline, equating the request to extortion because most locals end up paying authorities between 2,000 and 3,000 kyat to be excused from security detail. Also, property owners that have had land confiscated since November assert that, as of yet, they have not received compensation.

Nai Kyan Oung is from Youndaung Village and has cultivated his land for 60 years, after former generations tended the same plot. He said that many rubber and corn plantations located east of the village were buried under mud from the digging, but compensation has not arrived. After losing part of his property to a previous construction project, he said he does not expect compensation for the section of his corn plantation that now lies under upturned earth.

"In other countries, before setting up a pipeline, they train their workers and educate the local people to [prevent] frightening them. They take responsibility for the impact of the gas pipeline and compensate the people who have been affected. In my opinion, the government in our country should give assurances and [provide] clarification to the local people to calm their feelings toward the pipeline. I want the government to carefully review the project before they make a decision to implement such dangerous work," said a local field reporter. ■

Villagers slowly return to former communities in search of confiscated land

December 18, 2012

HURFOM: Over a decade ago, the neighboring villages of Chapon and Ah Mae in northern Ye Township were home to roughly 600 households, with numerous farms, orchards, and rubber plantations driving a prosperous local economy. However, after years of land confiscation and other human rights abuses by the Burmese military, hundreds of residents were driven into poverty or forced to flee the area. Local villager Mi Than Myit explained that, today, Chapon is home to just 38 families.



Nai Ha Lae, 53, had his plantation confiscated in Yebyu

After the New Mon State Party signed its first ceasefire agreement with the Burmese government in 1995, incidents of land confiscation, forced porter duty, restrictions to mobility, and extortion were regularly perpetrated by troops stationed at the nearby Navy Unit No. 43 and Light Infantry Battalion No. 282 bases. The villages of Chapon, Ah Mae, Min Htar, Yengain Kyi, Zinsoi, and Kywe Thone Nyi Ma lost a total

of 4,000 acres of rubber plantations to military seizure, and their populations dwindled as young boys and men fled from mounting forced labor.

“Today, the village is as silent as a cemetery. To use religious terms, [the period of military abuses] was hell. In our religion, suffering in hell happens after death, but we were suffering in a living hell, and many residents left the village. Now, we are relying on the Mon members of parliament who work on land confiscation issues to try to get our rubber plantations back,” said Chapon resident Nai Ngae.

Nai Pha Luu, also from Chapon, said, “In the past, this village was filled with households and was peaceful to live in, but [the violations] persisted and we could not work in peace. We always had to worry that [the naval troops] would order us to do porter duty or arrest us under suspicion that we had contact with some robber group. Most land, including mine, was confiscated and the villagers faced job shortages. If the military troops had never come, our village would not be desolate like it is now and our future would not be so short of hope.”

According to villagers, even as President Thein Sein took office in 2011 and the democratic transition began to build momentum, Navy Unit No. 43 continued to seize land in direct opposition to fledgling reforms.

“Although we are in a period of [democratization], we have not gotten our confiscated land back from Navy Unit No. 43. Most of the people who are now working in foreign countries were landowners before. When we think about that, we feel very sad for our land. After [some of] my land was confiscated, I wanted to go abroad like other people did, but I could not leave

my remaining four acres even though they didn't provide enough income. There were many people who could not leave their land like me. Although we already submitted a letter regarding the land issue to Mon [members of] parliament, we heard nothing from them and feel discouraged by their actions," said 47-year-old Min Tar resident Nai Ah Jaw.

A former NMSP township administrator from Yebyu Township who spoke on condition of anonymity said, "It is sad to hear about abuses like the ones in the past occurring now in this transitional period. These [land confiscation] violations are caused by the military and relate directly to business activities, and the local government and the [armed] ethnic groups do nothing to solve the problem."

"Any commerce or community issues linked to the military cannot be influenced by local or district-level government. When we see that, we see that the military is still in power. The military abused the residents in so many ways and could easily confiscate land after the residents were driven from the village. The problem is also related to the development of the [special economic] zone and the Dawei deep seaport project. No one can guess how much profit the military and the authorities will make from the land they confiscated once these locations [are converted into] a huge port and national trading site in the future."

Since Navy Unit No. 43 relocated to another area earlier this year, some former residents have begun to return to their native villages in the hopes that previously seized property will be restored as part of the country's reform process. But locals say it will be a long time before the communities regain their former size and productivity. Chapon does not have a motorway connecting it to urban centers, and boats can only be used for transportation in the rainy season, making the import of materials for construction and improvements difficult. Some villagers want to move back but worry there is no land available to cultivate, while others found reliable work in Thanbyuzayat Township and doubt the viability of economic opportunities at home. In spite of the challenges, village administrators and residents continue to submit letters of appeal requesting officials to return confiscated land.

"We will not forget the difficult times we lived through. In order to rebuild the village, the residents will return when the troops stop abusing local people and treating them inhumanely, even if the military does not give compensation for what they did. We are waiting for the day that the military stops abusing all people," said former Ah Mae resident Nai Baw, who now works on a rubber plantation in southern Thailand. ■

Plantations in Min Tar seized a second time

December 7, 2012

HURFOM: Since December 2010, Burmese Navy Unit No. 43, under the command of the Ka Dike regional command headquarters, has allegedly seized 3,000 acres of land spanning 200 rubber plantations on Kywe Thone Nyi Ma Island in Yebyu Township, Tenasserim Region. Recently, residents of the island's eastern Min Tar Village reported that after two years of being barred from their primary source of income, they were briefly allowed to work the plantations, only to have the land confiscated again.



According to the landowners, an agreement was made in August with the village administrators and naval authorities that granted them permission to work on their plantations in exchange for paying a monthly or annual tax. Villagers began actively tending to the fields that had fallen into disrepair after the two year ban, investing in new laborers and materials for cultivation. However, the arrangement lasted only three months,

after which residents reported being once again denied access to their land.

Plantation owner Nai Myint Aye described that on November 19, he was told by local officials that the authorization he received to cultivate his land was being revoked, despite the 500,000 kyat he had just spent on improvements to his land.

“I first got the permission to work my land for a fee of 50,000 kyat. On my eight acres, I upgraded four acres of rubber plantation in the hopes of earning income from tapping the trees. We cleared the shrubs that had grown during the ban...and we added more fertilizer. It cost over 30,000 kyat per day [to pay] the workers. When everything was ready, we were informed that the authorities banned us [from working the land] again, so it meant we prepared our plantation just for them [to use]. They did not see us as humans but as animals. We would like to know who can help us solve this problem. As for us, we have nothing to hope for except our plantation. Although it is impossible to get our land back, we still hope to get some part of it. We would like to get help from anyone who can help us.” ■

Four cases of “pink card” bribery

January 9, 2013

HURFOM: Numerous reports coming from citizens of Burma, also called Myanmar, highlight definite improvements to many people’s lives, especially relating to freedom of mobility and reduced corruption. However, over the past three weeks, residents of Ye and Mudon Townships in Mon State allege that bribery remains a common feature of the process to obtain national identification (ID) cards, locally known as “pink cards.”

Last month, two young men visited the Ye Township Immigration and National Registration Department to order replacement ID cards. To fill their request, they claim the department chief charged them 16 times the customary price.

“My friend and I went to the department [office] together to report our lost ID cards. When we asked them to make new cards by the following day, they would not make any promises. But when my friend started talking about money, they agreed to prepare the cards in one day for 50,000 kyat [each]. I refused to pay [that amount] because we only have to pay 3,000 kyat

in the village if we wait two weeks [for delivery]. I said I could not pay 50,000 kyat but would pay 35,000 kyat. They told me it would take two weeks even though I already agreed to pay 35,000 kyat. My friend paid 50,000 kyat and got his ID card the next day, but I have to wait two weeks.”

Residents from Ye Township described bribing the registration department chief as typical, saying that without payment, he refuses to provide his signature that is needed for ID card applications.



Myanmar National Identity Card

On December 26, a local woman visited the Ye registration department to renew her expiring ID. She said the office staff informed her that she had to pay extra to get the card, so she slid 10,000 kyat between her registration forms.

“The staff took the documents to the registration department chief, who got angry with them, in front of us, and said he would not make ID cards for anyone. But when he saw the money among the

papers, he stopped scolding them and signed his name. I was shocked.”

A similar complaint came from Mudon Township, where a 23-year-old woman has waited almost three years for her national ID card to be issued. In 2010, she went to the Mudon registration department to request the mandatory signed permission letter to start her application. She said she brought the necessary documentation, including her student ID card and “Form No. 10” that requires a detailed list of relatives’ names, but was asked by the clerk for 50,000 kyat to begin the process. The woman refused to pay, but gave her documents to the officer in the hopes that her application would eventually be pushed through. Today, she has yet to receive the card, and says all she can do is “wait for a new officer” to replace the one who is still unwilling to sign his name. ■

Report

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Infrastructure projects signal reform and reservations on the border

To gather opinions regarding the construction plans, HURFOM collected interviews and information from the field between December 2012 and January 2013. Discussions were held with more than 45 plantation owners and villagers, in addition to members of the Karen National Union, local municipal department staff, and people close to the Shwe Chaung Zone Company, the primary contractor working on the Three Pagodas Pass (TPP) to Kyainnseikyi project.

These testimonies revealed that many people living near the two projects’ paths have embraced the arrival of infrastructure that they hope will improve the way they travel, live, and do business. The news that the Karen State government allotted an astonishing 700 million kyat to the rural Kyainnseikyi project appears to have been met overall with surprise and approval. However, the enthusiasm for the eastern region’s inclusion in the country’s development process was also frequently accompanied by remarks that, despite the boon, the treatment villagers are receiving by local authorities and company representatives remains starkly similar to previous years under military rule. Almost all of the interviewees said that, despite their appreciation for the efforts, they had not

been given the opportunity to consult with relevant officials or ask questions about how their homes and villages would be impacted. Residents often described low-levels of information sharing along with concerns about impending damage to their land and doubts about compensation.

A key consideration regarding the infrastructure projects is the role of the Karen National Union (KNU), whose administrative areas encompass the entire TPP to Kyainnseikyi road and roughly 80% of the Death Railway reconstruction. The KNU has already agreed to allow construction to proceed, and will reportedly facilitate security and project monitoring. On occasion, the group has been asked to serve as a mediator between local people, construction companies, and government authorities.



Plantations along the road in Three Pagodas Pass

HURFOM

This role and its consequent relationship building is an important element of the peace process currently underway in Karen territories and the country writ large. The conflict in Karen areas, often called the world's longest running civil war, has prevented infrastructure projects from developing beyond early-stage proposals. In 2004, a "gentlemen's agreement" to end hostilities was reached between the Burmese Army and KNU's armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army, but collapsed in 2006. Other than this brief, informal arrangement, the KNU never entered into a ceasefire agreement with the government until January 2012, having been engaged in civil war for 63 consecutive years.

HURFOM aims to share voices from the ground in areas that are likely to be affected by these construction projects. While development is welcome and encouraged, it should not be associated with anxiety among landowners and local communities. Issues related to property ownership, transparency, civil society participation, and trust building between state governments, the business community, and rural populations are critical to monitor in the transition period. Truly democratic mechanisms for consultation and problem solving would greatly serve current reform goals, and if development projects do affect local livelihood, fair compensation must be readily available.

Three Pagodas Pass to Kyainnseikyi

Kyainnseikyi in Karen State is a town of more than 8,000 households divided lengthwise by the Zami River. Nearby, mountains cloaked in wild jungle stand above plantations growing rubber trees, betel leaves, cashew and arcera nuts. The road slated for renewal, which lies on the eastern bank of the waterway, was used in the past by British and Japanese troops, the latter utilizing the passage to transport rations and as an escape route to Thailand at the end of WWII. Today, the dirt road is

primarily used as a footpath for hunters, and after decades of disuse, many sections have been absorbed into the landscape.



Plantation along the road in Three Pagodas Pass

Negotiations to update the 53 miles of road between Three Pagodas Pass and Kyainnseikyi had previously been held by Karen authorities and local construction company Shwe Chaung Zone, but armed conflict prevented the plans from moving forward. The dirt road becomes unusable during the long rainy season, and upgrades promise year-round, “three seasons” passage connecting the border town to Mon State’s bustling city of Mudon to the north.

To orchestrate development projects in the area, including the new motorway, a Regional Development Committee was formed with representatives of the Karen State government, Shwe Chaung Zone Company, the KNU, and the Municipal Civil Engineering Department. The KNU entered into a partnership with the Shwe Chaung Zone Company to oversee and monitor the project, which will include construction of 52 small and medium-sized bridges to span the area’s many streams. Thus far, project stages have only included re-alignment, grading, excavating, and compacting the dirt road in preparation for the 2013 rainy season, after which asphalt can be poured. The company stated that to complete the project, additional funds may be needed to supplement the Karen State government’s 700 million kyat allocation. As the primary contractor, Shwe Chaung Zone has accepted the responsibility for motorway construction and distributing any compensation owed to residents.

According to a source close to Shwe Chaung Zone, although several TPP-based construction companies wanted to bid on the project, the company’s chairman, U Myo Oo, declined sub-contracting offers from everyone except U Khin Zaw’s company from Kyainnseikyi. The two companies split the construction job and began clearing the road in November, with Shwe Chaung Zone starting from TPP and heading north and U Khin Zaw’s company starting from Kyainnseikyi and working south. Now, there are only 20 kilometers left to grade and compact before the laborers converge.

Prior to breaking ground, the Three Pagodas Pass General Township Administrator, U Thein Tun, held a meeting on October 22 with village residents in Chaung Zone and Kyaw Pa Lu. The visiting delegation reportedly informed the local people that in order to claim compensation for land affected by construction, they needed to have La/Na Form No. 39, a land grant certificate that has been the only officially recognized proof of land ownership since Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party was formed in 1962. U Thein Tun explained that this certificate would assure compensation equivalent to triple the value of any land or buildings damaged by the road construction.



Plantation along the road in Three Pagodas Pass

HURFOM

However, as recently as one year ago, much of the area south of Kyainnseikyi was a free-fire “black” zone where Burmese military troops exerted no control but were permitted to fire at will on anyone they encountered. For decades, villagers had minimal access to large cities and restricted mobility due to frequent armed clashes, and were particularly unwilling to travel to government offices for documents that never served a purpose before. Residents described that, when buying or selling land, they observed the local custom of signing a document in the presence of the village headman who helped determine a fair price, facilitate the deal, and finalize the agreement with his signature. Although such documents exist, they are not recognized by the Karen State land survey department.

Villagers claim that contractor U Khin Zaw, who is a Kyainnseikyi native familiar with the area and its history, knows how unlikely it would be for locals to possess official land documents. But they allege that he, too, requires the La/Na No. 39 to initiate the compensation process. Several locals approached the KNU about their concerns, charging that U Khin Zaw has overlooked their rights in the interest of his business and enjoy the benefit of close ties to state government officials and certain KNU members.

“Construction companies have to pay compensation if the project affects the residents’ plantations, according to our agreement,” said a member of the KNU liaison office. “Our village administrator U Shwe Maung also told the state authorities to treat residents fairly in their exchanges with companies. I suggest to the residents that they start securing land grants, either from the KNU or the government, because it will be important when they deal with the companies.”

Many people said they remain hopeful that they can procure La/Na No. 39, but reported having little idea where to begin. Accounts from friends and neighbors claiming that bribery is frequently involved in the documentation process are also causing hesitation, even though land survey department offices issuing the La/Na No. 39 document are now open in Kyainnseikyi and Three Pagodas Pass.

“I think it is acceptable to build bridges and construct the road as part of this local development project because it will be easier for the residents to transport goods and travel,” said U Myoue Kyi, a Bayar Ngar Sue resident and owner of 3.5 acres of rubber and betel nut trees who described his views on the Shwe Chaung Zone Company. “We were treated similarly in the past, when companies ignored residents and plantation owners because [the companies] got permission from the authorities. Although we are living simple lives working on plantations, they should think about us. Now, it’s not like we hoped because they think that we are not important enough to have conversations with us about the project. For us, although it may be a small part of the plantation that is affected, it negatively impacts our businesses because we depend on this land.”

Some residents explained that they carefully planted farms and plantations away from the old road, but are still affected due to the new sections designed to straighten the route. A rubber plantation owner with 5 acres said that despite deliberately cultivating his trees in an area detached from the road, the construction slices across his land. In total, 18 Bayar Ngout Toe Village residents alleged that their plantations were affected by the project, but have yet to be acknowledged or compensated.

“Just like mine, many [young] rubber plantations with two to five years of growth have been damaged,” said Bayar Ngout Toe resident U Seik. “We put a lot of effort into working our plantations because it is our livelihoods. Since the Shwe Chaung Zone Company was given a contract by the government, they hold the power. We worry that the company will ignore [providing] compensation to the residents when the project is done. Who can guarantee or promise us that the company will pay some compensation? Therefore, all of the plantation owners held a meeting and will submit a letter of appeal to the KNU chairman. If there is no compensation for us, we will ask for help from the KNU.”

According to monastery supporter U Htet Tu from Chaung Zone Village, the project also affected land around a temple. “Our fence and temporary accommodation structure were damaged. The Shwe Chaung Zone Company has promised compensation, but we would like to suggest that the construction avoids our land [instead]. There is no blame on the project, but we prefer to see that the Shwe Chaung Zone Company and the [government] authorities take full responsibility for the villagers who have been affected.”

In addition, Daw Ma Kywae from Zin Kaung Village lost between 400 and 500 young rubber trees. Two Yae Lae villagers, U Htein Shwe and U Myat Lin, together lost around 300 mature rubber trees ready to be tapped. Fellow Yae Lae plantation owner U Khan Htee reported the destruction of 700 rubber trees due to the road’s realignment. In January, the four residents jointly asked U Khin Zaw for compensation and were told they if they could not produce the La/Na No. 39 document, he would work with them to find another solution. They stated that they have not heard from him since this exchange.

Death Railway Reconstruction

On May 15 last year, then-Railway Minister U Aung Min announced at a KNU opening ceremony that the Death Railway would be reconstructed. Within three or four years, he said, the new line would allow residents of TPP to quickly access Rangoon, while Burmese citizens could travel easily to Bangkok. In addition to the train track, he described a new motorway that would replace the current road as part of the Asia Highway network and a larger effort to create a regional industrial zone jointly led by ministers from Karen and Mon States.

Built by Japan during World War II, approximately 100,000 Asian laborers and allied POWs were killed laboring to construct the “Death Railway.” The track was later ripped apart as the Japanese army began its retreat across mainland Southeast Asia, but the route continued to be used as the primary motorway connecting Three Pagodas Pass to Thanbyuzayat in central Mon State.

In October, members of the (USDP) Union Solidarity and Development Party met with various political representatives and businessmen to discuss the railway’s reconstruction and upgrades to key infrastructure in the TPP area. Unlike the Kyainnseikyi road repair, the rail project represents a massive development venture with high-profile status and involvement by the central government.

On November 11, a land survey group, reportedly including three foreign engineers, came to Three Pagodas Pass ostensibly to assess the impending construction site. Accompanied by General Lin Oo, the Anang Kwin Village Tactical Commander No. 1 from the government security detail assigned to the evaluation, the team conducted surveys through villages, near homes and businesses, and across plantation, leaving residents and observers unsure about whether their land might now be selected for demolition. A former member of the New Mon State Party and TPP resident said he was informed that the government planned to undertake the track and motorway construction at the same time, and depending on its location, land impacted by the new motorway, which is anticipated to be 60 feet wide, would be compensated by the appropriate Karen or Mon ethnic groups.

Testimonies collected in the area demonstrated that residents do not yet know when the railway reconstruction and motorway projects will begin, whose land will be affected, or what companies will be responsible. Although some members of the business community reported hearing that 15 companies are currently vying for construction contracts, including domestic Burmese and foreign enterprises, there have been no official statements specifying the relevant dates or parties involved. Interviews revealed fears that homes would be bulldozed, requiring residents to find new houses, jobs, or plantations to work on. Some villagers worried that their children would no longer be able to attend school due to potential food and livelihood insecurity.



Legend	Dismantled Railroad	Township
	Summer Road	Village
	Motor way	
	State Borderline	
	Country Borderline	

Information on HURFOM and Invitation for reader feedback

Dear Readers,

The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) was founded in 1995 by a group of young Mon people. The organization's main objectives are:

- Monitoring the human rights situations in Mon territory and other areas of southern Burma,
- Protecting and promoting internationally recognized human rights in Burma.

In order to implement these objectives, HURFOM produces the monthly "Mon Forum" newsletter. If publication is delayed, it is because we are waiting to confirm information, and it comes with our heartfelt apologies.

We encourage you to write to us if you have feedback or if you know someone who you think would like to receive the newsletter. Please email or mail a name and address to:

HURFOM, P. O. Box 2237, General Post Office
Bangkok 10501, THAILAND
E-mail: hurfomcontact@yahoo.com
Website: <http://www.rehmonnya.org>

With regards,

Director
Human Rights Foundation of Monland

"The project, as supported by the government, is a valuable thing. It's enables improvements to transportation, traveling, and trading, as well as decreasing the overall cost of these activities," said a member of the KNU. "However, [if the company] cannot observe our requests, sections of the villages and plantations will be damaged, and villagers will have to rebuild new houses. For any losses caused by the road construction, we have four conditions to be met including replacing damaged buildings or land, compensating any destruction, financial assistance with local education and native linguistic programs, and infrastructure relating to water and electricity."

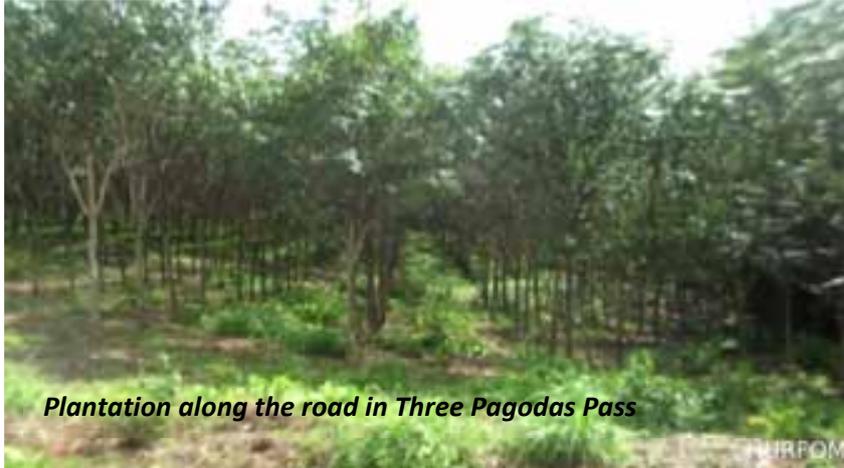
Caught in the middle

Joa Hbalu is a small town of roughly 200 households, but with a vibrant economy fueled almost entirely by rubber production. Many of the families are not native, but moved to Jo Hbalu from Ye Township or Three Pagodas Pass for its desirable proximity to Thailand, where the price of rubber is higher than in Burma. Now, the location has become a source of anxiety for residents who are sandwiched directly between the Death Railway and Kyainnseikyi projects. While few of the locals expressed resistance to infrastructure development, they shared a resounding call for transparency, information sharing, and fair compensation.

"Currently, there are many rubber and fruit trees on my plantation, and we cover our house expenses and our children's school fees with the income," said Resident Nai Shain, age 53. "If the plantation is confiscated, I would lose my livelihood since I have spent much of my money over the last 10 years on the plantation. It is impossible to start a new plantation in a new place. There are 2,000 rubber trees and it would cost 200,000 baht at the current price [to compensate the loss]. We cannot do other work; we were born into plantation work generation after generation.

Voicing a common theme that was repeatedly expressed by local villagers, Nai Shain added, “In order for us to continue our lives as Burmese citizens, I would like to make a request that the government provides us with the [land] grant [documentation] so that we can own our plantations legally.”

Nai Zaw Lwin, a 36-year-old father of three, lamented that his years of hard labor could now be threatened. “There are



Plantation along the road in Three Pagodas Pass

only 500 rubber trees on my plantation. I had many challenges to overcome to own that amount of trees, and I had to work for other people’s businesses to earn money. I never dared to spend the money I made because I had to spend half of my earnings on the plantation. I [also] had problems with the KNU when I started my

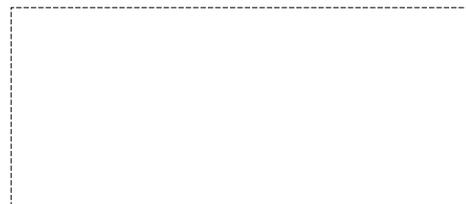
plantation. Finally, I was allowed to cultivate the trees after I begged for permission. It would be like my life was over if the plantation was confiscated or destroyed. It is the thing I possess. It covers our house expenses and our children’s school fees.”

One plantation owner asserted that, if his land growing more than 3,000 rubber and betel nut trees, coconuts, and citrus fruits was harmed in any way, he was prepared to engage in armed protest with a revolutionary group. “I want to ask the government not to confiscate residential land, and to dispense grants for people to fully and unconditionally own their plantations.”

In some cases, plantation owners were not swayed by talk of compensation. “Our family’s future, healthcare, and children’s schooling will be destroyed if the plantation is confiscated or damaged,” said Nai Sein Aung, whose 6-person family also cares for three additional dependents. “Regardless of whether or not they will pay compensation, I do not want the plantation to be confiscated. We do not want to suffer from the authorities’ oppression. I want to tell them that we are fully aware of our rights and want them respected.” ■

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