

Forced Labor on the Shwe Gin River in Burma

EarthRights International (ERI) has collected credible reports regarding the use of forced labor to construct a new hydroelectric dam on the Shwe Gin River, near Kyaut Nagar in Eastern Burma (see map below). This predominantly Karen area, north of Shwe Gin Township, is home to thousands of "internally displaced people" who have been repeatedly forced out of their homes by the military junta's activities. The dam project, which will eventually dislocate them once again, is currently pushing the local people further into poverty by stealing their labor.

According to villagers interviewed by an ERI fact-finding team in May (2002), soldiers routinely force them to work on the construction project. According to one local man, "We can only come back after we finished the work in the camp. In the camp, they don't have water and food for the workers. The military orders the villagers to do what they want. The soldiers don't have any sympathy for the workers."

Official information regarding the project, which is located on the edge of the armed conflict, is extremely difficult to obtain. The project is overseen by the state-owned Myanmar Electrical Power Enterprise (MEPE). In early 2001, a survey was conducted by four Japanese technicians working for an undisclosed company. Construction began shortly after and is to be completed in 2005. No social or environmental impact assessment was carried out prior to beginning construction. Reconnaissance of the area also reveals the construction of roads, military barracks, a helicopter pad, as well as surveillance posts on the western side of the river. The area surrounding the dam site is now heavily militarized.

Wretched History: Social and Environmental Impacts

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the military junta ruling Burma, targeted the area around the Shwe Gin River for its infamous "Four Cuts" operations, an anti-insurgency technique intended to cut the links between civilians and anti-Rangoon resistance groups by stopping the flow of food, money, intelligence information, and recruits. The SPDC used this tactic as part of its military struggle against the Karen National Union (KNU) during the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this tumultuous period, 45 villages, all located within five miles of the Shwe Gin River, were forced to relocate at gunpoint. Thousands of ethnic Karen abandoned their homes and ancestral lands without any compensation and tried to rebuild their lives at the relocation site near Shwe Gin Township. Thousands more opted to eke out a meager living in the surrounding jungle as "internally displaced people." As the situation stabilized in the mid-1980s, most people returned home and resumed their normal lives. But in 1988, the SPDC's military offensive against the KNU forced people to flee and these villages were completely destroyed again. Nearly all of these villages remain empty today.

Local people, who were required to carry out forced labor related to the construction of the dam, report that the area from Kyuat Nagar Village north to Sumuhte village is likely to be flooded. When this occurs, the local economy will be destroyed. In the meantime, SPDC officials and non-local entrepreneurs are exploiting the area's natural resources.

Gold mining

Since construction began on the dam in early 2001, the military has been illegally issuing gold mining permits in order to raise funds to support its operations.

According to the interviewees, military commanders claimed that the land belongs to the Government and its officers have the right to sell mining permits to ethnic Burmans, most of whom come from outside the area. Local farmers, most of whom have worked the land for generations but lack official papers, have received no compensation. Instead, they have had to watch as the economic migrants have dug up their crops, cut down their fruit trees, and polluted local water supplies in the search for gold.

Logging

Before dam construction and the gold mining, 200 orchards lined the banks of the Shwe Gin River. According to local records, there were more than 3,000 acres of *Shaut* (a kind of lemon-lime). One-third of Burma's *Shaut* crop comes from this area, as well as other valuable cash crops including betel-nut and durian. Rubber trees, originally planted by the British during the colonial period, still stand as well. Due to the construction and gold mining, local people report that large numbers of the *Shaut* trees have already died. The loss of the trees has dramatically reduced their income, making it difficult to pay taxes and provide for their families. In 2003, the situation is expected to further deteriorate as the military has announced that all trees will be cut down and sold prior to inundating the area.

Forced Labor

Since 1999, the SPDC has issued a series of Orders and Instructions which have gradually outlawed *all* forms of forced labor in Burma. However, the implementation of these decrees has been arbitrary. Local commanders around Kyaut Nagar Village, for example, told the headman that if the villagers did not want to provide porters to carry food, water, and ammunition to the frontline for the military, each household would have to pay 5,000 *Kyat* per year, a significant sum for subsistence farmers. While some people were able to pay, most could not, and have to work as unpaid laborers on a rotating basis. Men caught without ID papers and/or outside at night past curfew (even on their own property) are routinely arrested and forced to work for the military as porters. As a result, most of the villages around the dam remain empty. Without legal recourse and increased international pressure for change, people feel they have no choice but to submit or flee.

3