
Dams as ethnic cleansing: The Burmese junta's war against the Karenni people

Aung Ngyeh, a 31 year old Karenni, fled to Thailand in 2002, forced out of his home in Karenni State by the Burmese military's war against ethnic populations. He now lives in the refugee camp along the Thai border working with the Karenni Development Research Group (KDRG) campaigning to stop foreign investment in the Burmese regime's "development" projects.

For Aung Ngyeh and thousands of other displaced people like him, the Burmese military dictatorship's "development" projects such as the planned dams on the Salween River (as well as railway lines, highways, mines and natural gas pipelines) are tools of war used by the junta to harass and evict ethnic peoples.

When he was 16 years old, Aung Ngyeh worked as forced labour building the railway lines not far from the area of the Moby dam that feeds the Lawpita hydropower plants. Built with Japanese funding in the early 1960s on the Lawpita Falls in the Balu Chuang River in Karenni State, the Moby dam was Burma's first hydropower project.

About 12,500 Karenni people permanently lost their homes and fields to the dam reservoir covering about 207 square kilometers. Those living near the power plants were forced to leave at gunpoint and their fields were planted with land mines.

Since 1960, largely in efforts to control the Lawpita area, the Burmese military increased its presence in Karenni State to over 24 permanent battalions resulting in a constant terrorization of the population by the marauding soldiers. Forced labour and portering, harassment, extortion and random killings are common as well as sexual violence specifically targeting ethnic women including military gang rape.

Despite the hardship endured, the Karenni themselves derive little benefit from the Lawpita dam. At least eight percent of Karenni State does not get the electricity that is routed to Rangoon and Mandalay; anyway for most of the rural residents, the price of power is unaffordable. Moreover, as the water from the Balu Chaung River is diverted to the dam's turbines, villagers cannot get water for their fields when they need it and suffer chronic water shortages.

Karenni State is located on the eastern edge of Burma, between Thailand's Mae Hong Son province in the east, Shan State in the north, and Karen State in the south. The highly culturally diverse state has seven townships with a total population of about 300,000 that also includes "internally displaced populations".

Kayah peoples are the majority inhabitants of the state but there are other ethnic groups such as the Gekho, Geba, Karen, Kayan (Paduang), Kayaw, Bre, Manumanaw, Shan, Yinbaw and Yintalai. Each group has its own language, customs and beliefs; different dialects and other differences may also exist within each group. The majority of the people practise upland and lowland rice farming together with fishing, hunting and collection of forest products.

The seven townships of Karenni State roughly equate to the former kingdoms under Karenni kings or Sawphyas that ruled independently. In what is a reflection of existing tensions today with the Burmese dictatorship, the Karenni kingdoms were never subjugated even under British colonial rule and remained separate and independent until 1948 when Burma gained independence from the British.

After independence, the Burmese set up the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) government while the Karenni formed a parallel government, the Karenni Resistance Government (KRG), led by U Be Tu Re.

In 1948, Burmese troops invaded the Karenni states and assassinated U Be Tu Re. Ever since then, many armed Karenni groups such as the Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front or KNPLF have fought the Burmese. As of 2002, all groups except the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) – formed in 1957 from the KRG – had signed ceasefire agreements with the Burmese junta.

The junta used the ceasefire as a pretext to move into more strategic positions for greater control over Karenni area. After the ceasefire, the junta also collected the names of people involved in various Karenni liberation groups.

This is why, Aung Ngyeh says, he cannot yet return to his home in Karenni State as he is a marked man by the Burmese military. However, it still did not stop him going back sometime ago to other parts of the state, hiding in the forests and walking or hitching rides with villagers, traveling all the way up to Shan State in order to look at the present conditions.

He says that huge numbers of Karenni have already left the state: some to the border areas in Thailand, some hiding in the forests near their destroyed villages, and the vast majority forcibly moved to relocation camps where they are used as labour by the junta.

The villages affected by the forced relocations cover at least half the area of Karenni State and are home to at least 20,000-30,000 people. The junta gave them no more than a week to move to the specified sites and stated that, if found outside the relocation sites after that week, they would be considered as enemy troops and shot on sight.

During resettlement, the military went around looting and burning granaries, killing livestock and forcing everyone including children, pregnant women and elderly to walk through the hills to distant relocation sites.

Near the crowded relocation camps, there is little arable land to grow crops. Lacking proper food and medical care, people suffer from malnutrition and diseases such as malaria; women are constantly raped by armed soldiers and those who are captured escaping are killed.

Given the impacts of the Lawpita dam and the continuing war and forced relocations by the junta, Aung Ngyeh says that future projects such as the dams on the Salween River can only worsen an already unbearable situation for the Karenni peoples.

Presently, Thailand and Burma have agreed to build at least four dams along the Salween River in Burma, at Tasang in Shan State and Hatgyi, Weigyi, and Dagwin in Karen State. The Salween dams in total will produce 15-20,000 megawatts of electricity that will be sold to Thailand. The Weigyi dam, slated to begin construction in 2007, is at least ten times higher than the Moby dam, and will have the biggest impacts on the Karenni. Although sited in Karen State, the dam reservoir would flood over

640 square kilometers of Karenni State, including most of the area's lowland forests and agriculture land and disrupt riverine fisheries.

Although no studies are available about the forests in the Salween area of Karenni State, it is known that the hundreds of square kilometers of lowland forests to be submerged by the Weigyi reservoir lie within an ecoregion considered rich in biodiversity.

The Weigyi dam would completely submerge 28 villages in four Karenni townships including the entire towns of Pasaung and Bawlake, and although many villagers have already been forcibly relocated over the years, the dam would still directly affect an estimated 30,000 people. This includes the entire tribe of the Yintalai – about 1,000 people – a sub-ethnic group of the Kayah whose ancestral lands are in Pasaung and Bawlake.

Meanwhile, an estimated one third of the population are already forcibly resettled or displaced and over 22,000 Karenni refugees registered in camps in Thailand. If the Salween dams go ahead, many of these people will never be able to return home.

The Karenni groups are urging Thailand and other investors like China to halt all plans for dams on the Salween including the Weigyi dam. For the Karenni, already ravaged by half a century of war and violence waged by the Burmese junta, the Salween dams only promise more suffering.

By Noel Rajesh, e-mail: rajesh@sea-user.org

The information on the Karenni peoples and the Lawpita and Salween dams are based on the report "Dammed by Burma's Generals: The Karenni experience with hydropower development – from Lawpita to the Salween" published by the Karenni Development Research Group (KDRG). The full report is available at www.salweenwatch.org or contact kdr05@yahoo.com.