
[Thai government targets eviction of Pang Daeng ethnic communities for tourism and tree plantations](#)

Ms. Mai of the Palaung ethnic community and mother of three children in Pang Daeng village of north Thailand has been camped in front of Chiang Mai City Hall for the past few weeks. Along with about hundred members of her community, she came to petition the Chiang Mai governor for the release of her husband Mr. Tan Bortuk and others.

Thailand's Royal Forestry Department (RFD) arrested and jailed Tan Bortuk along with 47 other ethnic peoples including elderly people and pregnant women from the Pang Daeng village on 23 August 2004 on charges of illegal encroachment into Chiang Dao National Forest Reserve. On September 9, the Chiang Mai Provincial Court released the 48 ethnic people on bail and will take up preliminary hearings on the case next month.

Over the years, the RFD's harassment and repression of local communities especially ethnic minorities settled inside national forest reserves is not uncommon as the state attempts to classify forest lands into national parks or retake village lands for industrial tree plantations and tourism development.

But for the small Pang Daeng community of Lahu, Lisu and Palaung ethnic minorities, located in Chiang Dao forest of Chiang Mai province, the arrests are a recurring nightmare.

The first arrests started in 1988, with the RFD putting 19 Palaung ethnic peoples from Pang Daeng in jail. In 1998, the arrests went up to 56 including Lahu, Lisu and Palaung ethnic peoples; the charges were subsequently dropped and they were released under the agreement that the community would leave their lands. Now in August 2004, 48 people from Pang Daeng are in jail some for the second time.

Mai explains that, "The methods are usually the same. In the late evening or early dawn, hundreds of fully armed military and border police forces along with forestry officials enter the village. They break into houses and lead villagers into the waiting trucks. The officials often assure the villagers that they are being taken for a 'meeting' or that 'the government is providing free blankets'."

The arrests are random and no one is spared in the dragnet: in 1998, a 14 year old boy from a nearby village of Pang Tong was detained on his way home although he had just been visiting the Pang Daeng community for a day to mortgage his family's motorcycle; this year, a pregnant Palaung woman was arrested.

Tan Bortuk, 45, was jailed in 1998 and released after almost a year. He is now back in jail. Mai could not afford even the 40 baht (US\$ 1) to visit him in Chiang Mai; the bail amount set at 200,000 baht (US\$ 5,000) is beyond her reach.

Continued state harassment has forced severe food shortages on the Pang Daeng people, as they are unable to resume daily activities working as hired labour in the orchards and rice fields or tourism

in Chiang Dao. Fear has driven many people to sleep in small groups in the forest rather than in the village.

There are a number of reasons for the state to repeatedly target the Pang Daeng community but the main factor is the range of commercial interests involved: influential Thai business groups in Chiang Dao district want to build resorts and other tourist facilities in the scenic mountain area as well as expand fruit orchards; the RFD wants the area for commercial plantations of teak and other species; illegal logging by influential outsiders is also rampant in the area.

Tourism in Chiang Dao has rapidly expanded since 1995. The Chiang Dao Mountains are well-known for their scenic beauty – towering above the paddy fields is Doi Luang, a soaring peak of limestone rock that stretches 2,195 meters up into the sky; the centuries-old limestone geology of the area has created vast tunnels and caves dotted in the mountains. Given the high money stakes involved in tourism, state and business interests would rather have the Pang Daeng community removed from the area to make way for more resorts as well as fruit orchards and tree plantations.

Many of the Palaung people moved from Burma across the border to Thailand to escape the forced labour by the Burmese military. Ironically, however, after they moved to Thailand, the RFD began to use them as unpaid labour for its “reforestation” projects.

Mr. Aai Sangoi, 32, arrested once in 1998, says: “The RFD gave some land and hired us to do about 600 rai of teak reforestation in Pang Daeng Nai village. But although we planted their saplings, we only got paid some money for food but never for our labour.

“Last year, the RFD provided the Pang Daeng villagers with 1000’s of saplings of teak and other species and told them to replant in the surrounding forests. The villagers walked long distances to reach the forest areas and used about 5 days for replanting. A few days later, the Minister of Natural Resources visited the area and said the villagers were a good example of cooperation with the government. We don’t know if the saplings have survived.”

Kingkorn Na Ayuthaya, of the Northern Development Foundation in Chiang Mai, states that, “Most of the RFD’s reforestation projects are never actually intended to recover degraded forests but only to get a large budget. The officials use some of the money for saplings and to pay village people for replanting. But usually there’s a lot of corruption. It’s not surprising that many reforestation projects fail and the planted trees don’t last very long.”

Few of the Pang Daeng people have full Thai citizenship status as they are comparatively recent migrants to the area, many having moved in around the early 1980s and thus have little recourse to the laws protecting Thai citizens. Forestry officials eager to accomplish “annual reforestation targets” or to prove their official zeal in protecting upland forest areas exploit this situation.

Forest politics in Thailand has an underlying dimension of racial and ethnic prejudice. State officials and lowland Thais find it convenient to scapegoat upland ethnic minorities for ecological problems in the watersheds in north Thailand. Particularly since the late 1980s, increased water shortages have resulted in lowland Thai farming communities putting pressure on ethnic communities living and farming in upland areas to move down to “protect the upland watersheds”. This is despite the fact that the water shortages are usually attributable to increase in lowland cash crop and orchard farming and the expansion of urban areas, golf courses and tourist resorts rather than the upland farming of ethnic communities.

Kingkorn Na Ayuthaya adds, “The Pang Daeng community is an easy target for racially or ethnically motivated state officials to prove they are protecting the ‘upland forests’ from ‘hilltribes’.

This time, the arrests of the Pang Daeng community also serve a more insidious agenda of the RFD. Since the 1990s, rural people’s movements allied with nongovernmental organisations have fought for stronger legal recognition of forest-dwellers’ rights. Thailand’s 1997 Constitution contains several provisions protecting the rights of forest-dependent communities and ethnic minorities. But if the RFD can convince the court to order the eviction of the Pang Daeng community for forest encroachment, they would obtain a legal precedent encouraging further state arrests and intimidation of forest-dwelling communities and ethnic minority groups all over Thailand.

The Pang Daeng ethnic peoples are not willing to give up their lands and move from the area. The community has petitioned the Prime Minister, United Nations (UN) offices in Bangkok, the National Human Rights Commission and the National Lawyers Council. Civil society organizations have supported the community through merit-making ceremonies and fund-raising to assist the family members of the detained villagers.

Ms Anchalee Ponkleang of the nongovernmental group, Intermountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand (IMPECT) stated: “We are demanding that the provincial government set up a committee to solve the forest problems over the long-term. The government has to deal with the issues of citizenship as well as secure rights to housing and farmland for the Pang Daeng community.”

By: Noel Rajesh, e-mail: noelrajesh@yahoo.com , and Helen Leake, International Alliance of Indigenous Peoples (Chiang Mai Secretariat), e-mail: helen@international-alliance.org