
Burma: New roads pave the way for massive logging

A project is in progress to build a number of roads in Kachin State in return for huge logging concessions. While improving and expanding the infrastructure in Kachin State is much needed, the impact of this deal on the environment could prove to be disastrous.

A recent agreement involves the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K), the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and a Chinese construction company. The middleman in the deal is the Kachin Jadeland company, owned by Kachin businessmen Yup Zau Hkawng. The agreement stipulates that the Chinese company will build roads leading from Myitkyina to Sumprabum and, eventually, Putao, from Myitkyina to Bhamo, and from Wai Maw (near Myitkyina) to the Chinese border near Kampaiti.

In return for building these roads, the Kachin Jadeland company and the Chinese company have been given huge logging concessions deep in Kachin State. There are two concession areas, one located between the Mali Hka and the N'mai Hka rivers (the whole triangle-shaped area), and the other one between the railway line from Myitkyina to Mandalay to the road leading from Myitkyina to Bhamo. This area is in the heart of the Kachin State and has never been subject to large-scale logging. This project is the most massive logging effort ever undertaken in Burma, according to one observer.

But, according to a source, the deal with the Chinese construction company has been terminated and Yup Zau Hkawng is negotiating with a Malaysian-Chinese company to do the job. Another Kachin source confirms that companies from China, Malaysia and Hong Kong are working on the road from Wai Maw to the Chinese border. Despite the confusion over the partner company it looks as if Yup Zau Hkawng will go ahead with the plan.

Continued logging in Burma threatens one of mainland Southeast Asia's most forested regions as Burma contains half the forest in the region. In the last thirteen years, Burma's border with Thailand has been heavily logged. Concessions granted to Thai logging firms have left areas in the Shan, Karenni, and Karen States without any significant forests. This leaves the Chindwin Valley in Sagaing Division and the Kachin State as one of the few remaining undisturbed forests in Burma. The effect of these concessions will be devastating for the environment, says one Thai-based environmentalist.

Further concessions endanger one of the world's remaining sources of biodiversity. The Kachin State is part of the Indo-Burmese region, one of the eight "hottest hotspots for biodiversity" in the world. The hotspots are sites containing the greatest concentration of endemic species that are also experiencing exceptional loss of habitat.

A 1998 report by the World Resources Institute, noted that extensive deforestation had already caused massive soil erosion, sedimentation of rivers, increased flooding and acute dry season water shortages in some areas. Further logging looks to intensify the severity of these problems. And the destruction of forests in this area along the headwaters of the Irrawaddy River will not only damage the environment but will also have a grave impact on the livelihood of people downstream. Increased

flooding endangers rice paddies along the Irrawaddy as well as riverine fisheries.

Logging has been underway in Kachin State for over ten years. Heavy logging has already taken place on the east side of the Nmai Kha River down to Sinbo and Bhamo. Reports from the region indicate that loggers have clear-cut the area.

The flow of logs from these earlier concessions has fueled the growth of a thriving border trade in timber. Logging companies have built a network of roads running from China over high mountain passes to extract the timber from a strip of land along the Kachin State's border with China. The roads lead to a string of logging towns -Ruili, Yingjiang, Tenchong, Fugong, Hpimaw, and Panwa. In Hpimaw alone, there are an estimated seventy sawmills. A recent visitor to Pawnwa, a border town in Yunnan, reported a steady flow of logging trucks coming across the Chinese border from Burma.

China's appetite for wood is big and growing, particularly after the Chinese government implemented a logging ban for twelve provinces in 1998 after severe flooding in the upper Yangtze Valley. In 2000, six provinces were added to the list. Since the ban, China has become the world's second largest wood importer behind the US. Will the Burmese people and environment pay the price for forest conservation in China?