
Burma: Human rights abuses linked to foreign investment in "development"

Foreign investment in mining, gas exploitation and dam megaprojects --identified with "development"-- in fact constitute a direct cause for human rights abuses and a threat to environmental sustainability in Burma. The country is governed by a military dictatorship since 1962, which has imposed a regime characterised by state terrorism.

The social and environmental damage mining operations have brought to Burma are analysed in the recently released report "Grave Diggers" written by Roger Moody and disseminated by a group of Canadian environmental NGOs. The report highlights the activities of Robert Friedland and his mining and financial empire Ivanhoe Capital Corporation (ICC). Friedland is notorious for the environmental disasters caused by mining operations he owned in the United States and Guyana, and his corporate links to mercenary armies in Sierra Leone. In 1994 ICC reached an agreement with the Burmese military regime to exploit the Monywa copper mine. These operations have caused water pollution and skin problems to local residents while safety measures were completely absent. Additionally, local dwellers were threatened by the use of explosives for mining. It is astonishing that even though the financing for this operation is handled through a firm registered in Canada (Friedland's Ivanhoe Mines Ltd.) and human rights organizations worldwide have condemned corporations for doing business in connection with the brutal Burmese regime, the Canadian government has completely overlooked Ivanhoe's investment in that country.

The Yadana gas pipeline is another case where the performance of foreign companies in collusion with the government has been severely questioned due to its environmental impacts and to the violation of human rights to the detriment of the local villagers (see WRM Bulletin 36). On September 7 a Federal judge of Los Angeles cleared Unocal Corp. --one of the largest remaining U.S. investors in Burma-- of responsibility for alleged human rights abuses during the construction of the Yadana pipeline. Unocal holds 28.6 % of the shares of the consortium in charge of the works, which ended in 1998. Lawyers representing Burmese villagers that presented the demand in 1996, who claim that they were either forced by the military to work on the project or were terrorised for not doing so, said they would appeal the decision. Unocal did not dispute the assertion that it was aware that human rights abuses were being committed by the host government during the pipeline project. Nevertheless, according to the judge, it was not proven that the oil company had conspired with the military to force the villagers to work. The question is whether justice can accept the "omission" of a powerful transnational in a case regarding human rights abuses, especially when its activities are favoured by those directly responsible for them.

Last but not least, a dam project led by the Thai dam-building company GMS Power and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), which aims to build a huge dam at the Salween River, the only remaining free-flowing major river in the region, has recently also given place to human rights abuses in Burma. Since 1997 villages in Kunhing Township, along the banks of the Salween and its tributary Nampang have been relocated. Altogether 175 villages, 4,018 households and more than 1,400 hectares of fields would be flooded when the dam is completed. But since last May the situation got even worse. Villagers in southern Shan State have denounced that the

Burmese Army had begun an operation of extermination of the population located in the areas to be flooded by the dam's reservoir.

Article based on information from: Drillbits & Tailings, Volume 5, Number 16, 30/9/2000; International Rivers Network,