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February 21, 2016

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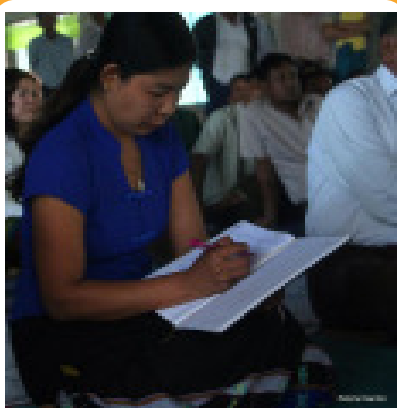
HURFOM organised the event in cooperation with a group of Mon State CBOs, with help from a working committee of activist farmers interested in land rights. The seminar, targeted at farmers in eastern Salween, was held in Paing Khit Hall, located in Myaintharyar quarter of Moulmein.

In total 94 representatives were in attendance, coming from 20 organisations based in Ye, Paung, Yebyu, Chaungzon, Mudon, Thanbyuzayat, Kyiakmayaw and Moulmein townships.

The seminar was held with the goal of explaining the strengths and weaknesses of current land laws, particularly in terms of protections offered to farmers and land users. The seminar also aimed to document farmers’ cases, in the hope of using this information to influence future land policy.

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FEMALE CANDIDATE BEATS MALE COMPETITION IN MON STATE VILLAGE POLL



MON PARLIAMENTARIAN VOWS TO STAND WITH MON ACTIVISTS IN FIGHT AGAINST MCL CEMENT FACTORY



March 1, 2016

HURFOM: Mon National Party (MNP) parliamentarian Nai Soi Ha has announced his commitment to standing alongside Mon community members, as they fight a planned coal-fired cement factory in Mon State’s Kyiakmayaw Township.

The cement factory, planned by Mawlamyine Cement Limited (MCL) is set to be located between Kaw Don and Kaw Panor villages in Kyiakmayaw Township, Mon State. MCL, a subsidiary of the well-established Siam Cement Group, say that the factory is due to open in mid 2016.

In recent weeks local residents joined together to oppose the project, after news surfaced that it would be operated using electricity generated from an on-site coal power plant.

Mi Ni Ni, from Kaw Don village, expressed, “We [the villagers] didn’t

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Commentary

New NLD government must act smart in endorsing development projects that benefit the people



Photo: frontiertmyanmar.net

Recently, in a press conference on March 9, Mon villagers from the Parlain area of Ye Township, Mon State, declared their continued opposition to the 1280 megawatt coal power plant to be built in An Din village. They stated that the coal power plant was not needed in their area, giving evidence from a survey showing that the area has rich natural resources that could be destroyed by the project.

This is just one community among many others. Similarly, when locals celebrated International Day of Action for Rivers in Kolonethar village, around 500 residents came out to the banks of the Taninthayi River, claiming that resource extraction and energy projects proposed for their area were unnecessary, and that these projects would destroy villagers' livelihoods and their environment. Locals also called for an end to the damming of the Taninthayi River.

Such movements against megaprojects – from the Latpadaung copper mine to

coal power plants in Mon State, and to the Special Economic Zone in Tavoy – faced struggles under the previous military-led government. The previous government permitted almost all of these megaprojects. Foreign companies were not required to consult with local communities to complete environmental impact assessments and social impact assessments. Furthermore, these projects were not planned or managed with transparency. Villagers were not told clearly about the real consequences of these projects for their livelihoods, environment and resources.

However, on November 8, the people rejected the previous regime. The people have high expectations for the incoming government in terms of political reform. The new NLD government, the first civilian government in 50 years, must, amongst other political reforms, review all of these development projects.

The people in Burma need development. However, the people also want

to make sure that development projects will truly benefit their lives, and they want to lessen damaging impacts on their environment and natural resources. The incoming government must consider these priorities and should find new routes to pursue development, through means that do not displace people, dam their rivers, burn their environment and expel toxic dust into the sky.

The NLD government must rally behind sustainable development that invites participation from the people, and allows negotiation for win-win solutions. Only then will the people truly benefit from development projects, which will have the added plus of generating income for the state.

Currently, the people of Burma need development assistance to stimulate growth in their incomes and livelihoods. People in both urban and rural areas need opportunities for wide-scale employment in light industry, in projects that do not harm the environment and natural resources.

The NLD government is well placed to obtain a significant amount of international assistance and foreign investment. The new government needs to act smart in the way it selects which foreign investments it will stand behind, endorsing investment that does not negatively impact the people or their environment.

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In total 94 representatives were in attendance, coming from 20 organisations based in Ye, Paung, Yebyu, Chaungzon, Mudon, Thanbyuzayat, Kyiakmayaw and Moulmein townships.

The seminar was held with the goal of explaining the strengths and weaknesses of current land laws, particularly in terms of protections offered to farmers and land users. The seminar also aimed to document farmers’ cases, in the hope of using this information to influence future land policy.

In addition, it was hoped that the seminar might offer space for healing for farmers who lost their land to confiscation.

HURFOM committee member Nai Oung Mon described, “The main point is that we would like to see our Mon farmers understand their rights better, and for them to more effectively understand land laws. After hearing about land disputes all over the country, we want to support farmers in Mon areas.”

Participants discussed difficulties faced by land users across the country and sought advice on how to resolve land conflicts in their areas. Particular focus was given to the issue of customary land tenure, with many farmers at risk of losing land that, while handed down in their families for generations, lacks official paperwork.

Ma Thida, a seminar attendee from Tarana village in Kyaimayaw Township,

described the problems she herself had faced when her family’s land was sold without their knowledge or consent, “In our township, there are cases where the landowners do not know that their land has been sold. Our family was one of these cases. Of course we want our land back.”

Speaking to seminar participants, U Myint Thwin explained the current laws governing different types of land, and offered advice to those facing land conflicts.

U Myint Thwin told HURFOM, “The government and relevant departments never give talks on this issue...There is no law to protect these farmers. [The law] only hurts them. Currently, according to the vacant and fallow land policy, farmers can be compensated for their crops [when land is confiscated], but it is not easy for them to secure this compensation.”

The seminar concluded with participants agreeing on nine points and demands.

HURFOM Activities

NO COAL NO TTCL, PARLAIN HAS AN ABUNDANCE OF NATURAL RESOURCES



HURFOM

In a press conference at the Rangoon/Yangon Orchid Hotel on March 9, Ann Din village activist Mi Ni Mar Oo stated, "We have plenty of natural resources and good income in our region, therefore we do not need a coal power plant."

The press conference in question was held to launch a community-based livelihood and community resource assessment report, entitled 'Parlain Natural Resources and Community'. Around 100 participants attended the conference, mostly from media and civil society groups. The press conference was organised by Parlain community activists, the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) and Paung Ku, with assistance from the Thai NGO Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA).

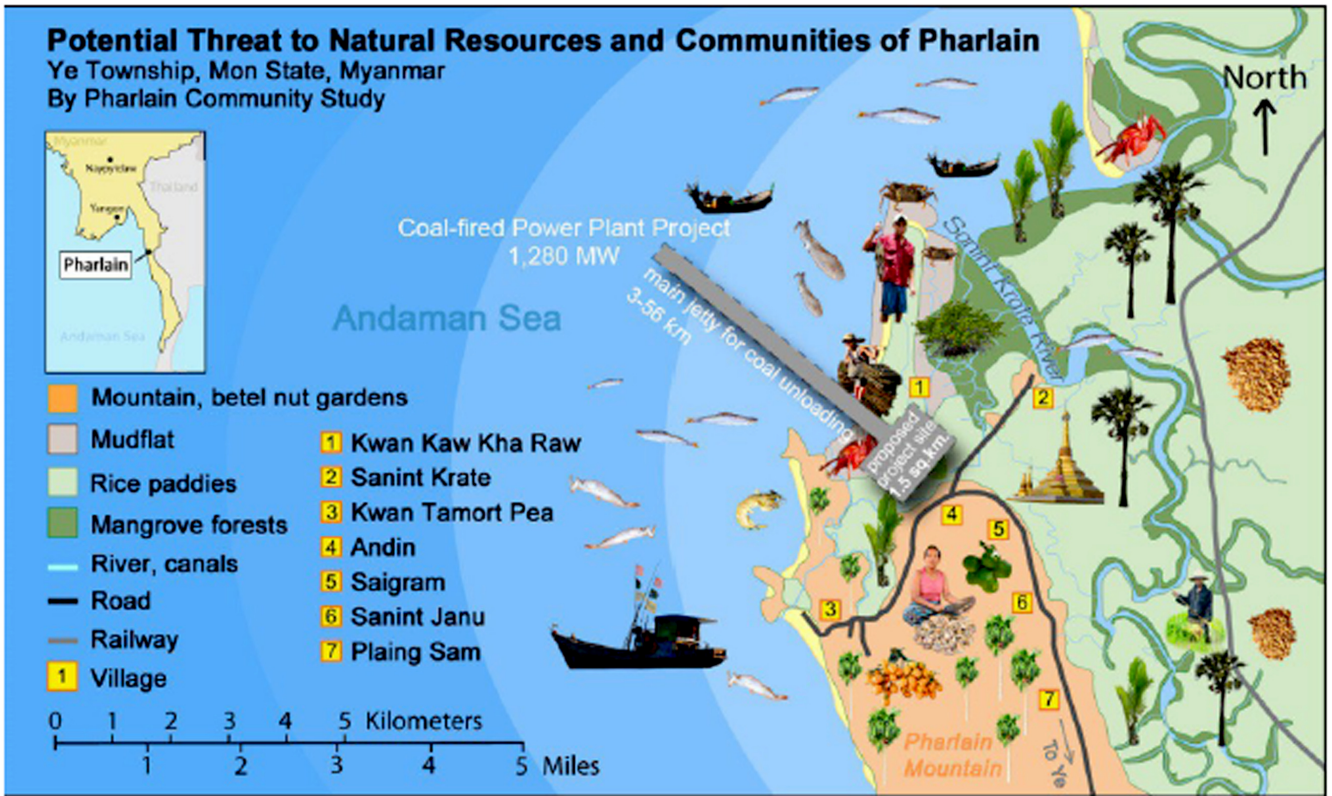
Locals from Parlain described the area's rich natural resources, society and culture. Nai Kasauh Mon, Executive Director of HURFOM, urged the new National League for Democracy (NLD) government to review dangerous and dirty megaprojects throughout the country, especially plans for coal power plants, calling on the new government to consider alternative sources of energy.

Nai Kasauh Mon stressed how people in Parlain have grown concerned about the future of their natural resources and livelihoods, with concerns about the sustainability of agriculture, fishing, and natural ecosystems. He highlighted how these worries followed the announcement by the Thai and Japanese joint venture corporation Toyo-Thai Company Limited (TTCL), that it planned to build a 1280 megawatt coal power plant in Parlain region's Ann Din village. On April 9, 2015, TTCL signed a memorandum of agreement with the Ministry of Electric Power to this effect.

Ni Mar Oo and other local activists explained how, in compiling the report, they organised people from seven villages to conduct a survey on the area's natural resources and local livelihoods. Results showed that the three main income sources in the region are fishing, rice paddies and betel nut cultivation. A brief for the report explains:



HURFOM Activities



“The most common ways for Parlain residents to make a living are betel nut gardens, fish folds and rice farms. In Parlain, there are 712 households who own betel nut gardens. Between 2014 and 2015, the total income in Parlain from betel nut was 3,008,520,000 Kyat.

People also cultivate fruit gardens, which include durian, coconut, lemon, orange, pomelo, jering and champedak fruits. The total annual income for the area from 13 common fruits is 458,013,650 Kyat.

Rice is mainly cultivated for the family, but goods are occasionally sold to the market. There are at least 325 households in Parlain owning rice paddy fields, who together make over 510,566,000 Kyat annually.

Fishing takes place in the sea, rivers, mangrove forests, mudflats and rice paddies. Fish products, both fresh and dried, are mainly collected and traded by residents in two villages – Sanint Krate and Kwan Tamort Pea – which together have around 108 fishing households. Fishing in Ann Din village tract generates an annual income of 3,263,400,000 Kyat.

In total, the annual income in Parlain generated by betel nut, fruit, rice and fishing comes to 7,240,499,640 Kyat.”

At the current exchange rate, the annual income for villages in Parlain region totals 6 million US dollars. This is high in comparison to income found elsewhere in Burma, showing that people in Parlain have found strong livelihoods and sustainable markets for their products.

This evidence suggests that Parlain’s local economy does not need the proposed coal power plant but is strong enough on its own. The data also shows that a coal plant in Ann Din would risk damaging vibrant local livelihoods already in existence.

One journalist at the press conference asked, ‘What is the villagers’ plan if the new NLD government doesn’t care about the project and still approves it?’ Activist Ni Mar Oo replied, “Whatever any government’s decision, we will keep fighting for no coal and no Toyo-Thai Company.”

Villagers from Parlain area described how around 6,000 people joined together on May 5, 2015, to demonstrate against the coal plant project, proclaiming, “No coal, no TTCL.” While TTCL ignored community opposition, at the end of 2015 the Deputy Minister of Electric Power suspended the project. The community remains resolute in their opposition to the coal plant.

“We have plenty of natural resources and good income in our region, therefore we do not need a coal power plant.”

News

IN YEBYU TOWNSHIP, VILLAGERS DREAM OF LIVING AND WORKING IN PEACE



February 5, 2016

HURFOM: In the past month HURFOM has reported twice on recent threats of extortion faced by villagers in Yebyu Township, located in northern Tenasserim Division, at the hands of splinter group forces. As residents in Sin Swe and Sein Pon villages look to the future, they dream of living and working in peace. One question, however, remains unanswered: as Burma’s democratic transition continues, how much longer until their dreams will finally become reality?

Splinter group extortion from 2004

Since 2004 Sin Swe and Sein Pon villages have suffered at the hands of various Mon splinter groups, with prominent groups threatening the village named as the Nai Bin, Nai Saung and Nai Lwin groups. For years these groups have regularly extorted money from residents, using threats and coercion to pressure villagers into meeting their demands.

According to locals, splinter group activity in Yebyu Township remains just as rampant today as in the days of military government, despite increased Tatmadaw militarization in Yebyu Township during President Thein Sein’s term. For two decades Mon splinter groups have appeared free to extort money from villagers in northern Tenasserim Division without the threat of legal or military retribution.

Villagers in Sin Swe and Sein Pon villages say that, over the years, security hazards due to splinter group activity have exacerbated livelihood difficulties, and have provoked many residents to leave their villages, migrating to neighbouring countries for work.

Today, the most active group locally is known as the Nai Mon Chan group. According to a local expert, it is comprised of seven or eight members and is led by a Mon militant named Nai Mon Chan. Reportedly, Nai Mon Chan’s group are known for their high demands, but they have not yet killed or physically harmed any victims.

“They came in uniform, with guns”: Extortion in Sin Swe, December 2015

In late December last year, Nai Mon Chan’s group kidnapped local residents in Sin Swe village and demanded a vast amount of money in exchange for their release.

An eyewitness detailed, “Nai Mon Chan’s group came to the village at around 10 p.m. and began extorting money [...] There were seven of them. Mon Chan was the only one who was old, the other [splinter group] members were young. They came in uniform, with guns, including two 40 millimeters, an M16 and an AK.”

“I think they threaten people when they demand money because they want people to feel under pressure to give them money quickly,” he continued, “Mon Chan threatened the villagers that if anything happens to his members he will cause trouble for the whole village.”

According to residents, in the December incident Nai Mon Chan’s group made off with 1.4 million Kyat, 2 Kyatha of gold, and 10 hostages. The hostages were freed when the group reached Yay Ngan, by which point they had reportedly extorted another 300,000 Kyat from nearby Sein Pon village.

New year, new threats

Since then, residents say that threats from Nai Mon Chan’s group have continued to escalate. In January 2016 Nai Mon Chan’s group made several phone calls to Sin Swe village, demanding a further 6 million Kyat. After negotiations with a prominent monk, the demand was reduced to 3 million.

According to a villager who wishes to remain anonymous, locals have been given 15 days to voluntarily pay up to Nai Mon Chan’s demands. Reportedly, Nai Mon Chan has announced that if the villagers fail to deliver the money, his group will visit in person to forcibly seize it.

However, the latest threats from Nai Mon Chan have come at a bad time for farmers, following a plunge in rubber prices that has crippled one of the major forms of trade in Yebyu Township.

As threats from Nai Mon Chan’s group continue to abound, Sin Swe villagers have yet to pay up the 3 million Kyat

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News

40-YEAR-OLD WOMAN MURDERED IN THREE PAGODA PASS

March 9, 2016

On March 3 a 40-year-old woman was murdered in the Thai-Burma border town of Three Pagodas Pass, in Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State.

The victim, Ma Nan Sine Khan, was visiting Three Pagodas Pass from her home in Lashio, Shan State. According to reports, the alleged perpetrator, U Hla Aung, had previously borrowed money from Ma Nan Sine Khan and had invited her to visit Three Pagodas Pass to discuss his payment.

Ma Nan Sine Khan arrived in Three Pagodas Pass on March 1, accompanied by a male friend, Saw Hla Min. On the night of March 3, U Hla Aung picked Ma Nan Sine Khan and Saw Hla Min up from Ta Pay Oo guesthouse and drove them to a rubber plantation in Karen Suu quarter.

At around 9 p.m. it is alleged that U Hla Aung shot both Ma Nan Sine Khan and Saw Hla Min, with Ma Nan Sine Khan dying immediately at the scene. Saw Hla Min survived the attack and was treated at Three Pagodas Pass hospital.

Saw Hla Min explained, "I followed her here as a friend. U Hla Aung invited us to come here to discuss the money he borrowed from Ma Nan Sine Khan. But when we arrived here he did this to us."

Locals say that U Hla Aung and his wife disappeared from Three Pagodas after the incident and have not been seen since.

Local authorities recovered Ma Nan Sine Khan's mobile phone after the attack and found messages left by U Hla Aung that corroborate Saw Hla Min's story. Police in Three Pagodas Pass have charged U Hla Aung under Article 302 of the Penal Code and have issued a warrant for his arrest.

UNKNOWN ARMED GROUP EXTORTS OVER 1M KYAT IN ONE NIGHT FROM YEBYU TOWNSHIP VILLAGERS

January 19, 2016

On the night of December 26 last year, an unknown Mon armed group extorted over 1 million Kyat from residents in three Tenasserim Division villages. The villages visited by the armed group were located in Min Thar and Nat Gyi Sin village tracts, situated in Tenasserim Division's Yebyu Township.

According to reports, the unknown group – thought to be coordinated by a leader called Nai Mon Cha – arrived at Sin Swe village first, a small rural village in Min Thar Village Tract comprised of around 120 households. The group visited houses across the village, demanding 10,000 to 30,000 Kyat from each house. In total, the group extorted over 1.2 million Kyat from Sin Swe villagers, in addition to taking large quantities of valuable produce.

A local rubber plantation owner described the scene, "Seven people from the group came to our village at around 9 p.m. and demanded money from the villagers. They took 1,213,000 Kyat, two kkyattha of gold [a Burmese unit of measurement], five mobile phones, and other things from the market, such as rice, oil and cigarettes."

In addition to demanding money and goods, the group reportedly took Sin Swe's village administrator hostage, alongside other villagers, threatening to kidnap them if locals did not pay up.

Nai W- N-, a rubber plantation owner who was taken hostage, described, "They came to my farm at around 9 p.m. and took rice from my hut and 10,000 Kyat. I only had 10,000 Kyat on me, so they just took that amount. They told me to take them to the village administrator's house. Then, they extorted money from the rest of the village, taking me and the village administrator with them."

After midnight, the group is reported to have moved on to Yay Ngan Gyi and Sein Pon villages, taking a truck, three motorbikes and 15 villagers from Sin Swe with them.

An eyewitness from Sein Pon village described, "They arrived in our village at 1 a.m. They called our village administrator and asked him to gather the villagers in the street. They demanded that we pay them 3 million Kyat. But we didn't have enough money that night to pay, so they said that we should send them the money within 10 days."

Reportedly, militia members arrived in Sein Pon two hours later to investigate, but by that point the unknown armed group had fled the scene. Villagers in Sein Pon say that they have not yet paid the sum demanded by the armed group.

Unfortunately for villagers in this area, the events of December 26 do not constitute a new threat to their livelihoods and safety. Locals say that the group in question demands money from villagers up to four times per year, regularly using tactics such as kidnapping to aid their extortion.

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demanding of them, leaving them in a vulnerable position.

Residents say that they just want to live and work in peace, protected by the law.

Nai Win, a 35-year-old from Sein Pon

village, explained, "The region is not safe. The price of rubber is dropping. If we work on our rubber plantations we don't make any profit. At the same time, the splinter groups are extorting our money. If we can't pay them, then we can't travel outside our village [due to security risks]. We are in trouble. We need help from the relevant authorities

[...] We would like to report [our case] to the government. But if we report it openly we are worried about our safety."

He concluded, asking the question, "What do other areas do to be safe? When will we live and work peacefully like them?"

News

CHILD RIGHTS COMMITTEE HOLDS STRATEGIC PLANNING WORKSHOP IN MAE SOT

February 8, 2016

WCRP, Mae Sot: On February 1-2, organisations from the border and inside Burma attended a strategic planning workshop in Mae Sot, Thailand, organised by the Committee for the Protection and Promotion of Child Rights (CPPCR).

The workshop, held at the Queen Palace Hotel, covered issues commonly faced by children living along the Thai-Burma border, including rights for children born in Thailand, procedures for transferring citizenship rights, abandoned and orphaned children, and child protection policy.

Overall, 86 participants attended, representing 38 organisations, including the Karen Women’s Organization, Mae Tao Clinic, Save the Children, UNHCR, Thai-Burma Border Health Initiative (TBBHI), the Women and Child Rights Project (WCRP) and World Vision.

Ko Naing Min, Director of CPPCR, explained, “We organized this workshop for three main reasons. First, to provide an overview of child protection strategies on the border and inside [Burma]. Second, to find out our strengths and weaknesses, and how we can improve our work. And finally, to get advice from other organisations for our next two years of work, including how we can cooperate and work together.”

The workshop concluded with seven work goals agreed: to broaden networks among organizations working for child protection; to lobby Burma’s newly elected government on child protection; to ensure Burma’s neighboring countries can produce birth certificates for children born in their territory; to advocate for Thai

and Burmese governments to recognise border and ethnic areas, and the right of children living there to apply for citizenship; to collect data on child protection and birth certification; to work in cooperation with government departments and civil society organisations to provide public education on child protection; and to achieve cooperation between government and civil society on the issue of child trafficking.

TBBHI representative Mi Don Kit detailed, “Many organisations joined the workshop, both from inside the country and from the border. We are all working on the same issue, child protection, so we have all widened our networks with CSOs [civil society organisations] inside Burma. If we can implement the work plan that resulted from this workshop, that will be great.”

CPPCR was formed in 2003 to help marginalised and exploited Burmese children living near the Thai-Burma border point of Mae Sot – Myawaddy. CPPCR works on a range of issues, including child exploitation and birth registration.

ATTEMPTED ROBBERY LEADS TO DEATHS AT WAGARU VILLAGE, THANBYUZAYAT

January 7, 2016

HURFOM: On December 19, 2015, a militia force member offers arrested a 30-year-old man from Wagaru village, Thanbyuzayat Township, in connection to an attack and attempted robbery that left the victim and a police officer dead and three others seriously injured.

According to a local militia force member, the man arrested, Ye Aung (also known as Khmai Join), is known locally as a mentally ill drug user and criminal.

Ye Aung was arrested after attacking and attempting to rob a Wagaru villager at a mountain pagoda above the village.

A local militia force member, Nai Khaung Chon, described the attack, “[The victim] was wearing jewellery. [Ye Aung] tried to steal the jewellery, by attacking with a knife. [The victim] was

injured in his thigh and ran to escape, but Ye Aung chased him, and [the victim] fell due to the injury in his thigh. [The victim] was attacked five times by Ye Aung and eventually died”.

Soon after the attack, local militia member and nearby workers raced to the scene to apprehend the attacker. Ye Aung surrendered his knife, but retained a piece of wood, which he used to violently attack militia member and villagers as they fought to detain him. A militia member was killed in the struggle, while three other locals were left seriously injured.

According to Nai Khaung Chon, while the militia members were armed with guns they were hesitant to shoot at Ye Aung.

Nai Khaung Chon explained that militia force members have long been

concerned about Ye Aung’s illicit activities in the village. Nai Khaung Chon detailed, “He has been using drugs for a long time, but his parents tried to hide it. He has been doing things like this in the village for a long time. No one dared to stop him or report him”.

According to Nai Khaung Chon, drug use has caused many problems in Wagaru village. “We have too many drug users in our village” he said, “They gather at the pagoda on the hill. They gather here and there. They are out of control. No one is arresting them”.

Meanwhile Ye Aung remains in detention, having been transferred from Thanbyuzayat Police Station to Moulmein.

News

PLANTATION OWNERS CUT DOWN RUBBER TREES AS PRICES CONTINUE TO DROP



March 12, 2016

With rubber prices continuing to drop, many Mon State plantation owners have given up on rubber tapping, and are instead beginning to cut down and sell their rubber trees for quick cash.

Rubber prices have more than halved in recent years, falling to a current rate of around 400 Kyat per pound. As prices crash, locals say that plantation owners are cutting down even very young trees, judging that it is not worth their while to cultivate them any longer.

Nai Sein, from Chot Plaing Village, Ye Township, explained, "The price for rubber wood is not so bad, that's why many people are willing to sell [their trees]... If it keeps going like this, I worry that there will be less and less rubber business in our area."

Reportedly, plantation owners are being offered up to 10,000 Kyat per tree. Rubber wood buyer, Nai Pyout, detailed, "At this time, it is not easy [for plantation owners] to earn even 10,000 or 20,000 Kyat per day [from rubber tapping]. If they sell the whole tree they can get one million Kyat for 100 plants, or ten million Kyat for 1000 plants."

He continued, "At the current price, it is very tiring to tap 1000 plants and earn very little. That is why many plantation owners are [selling their trees]."

The price for rubber wood is not so bad, that's why many people are willing to sell [their trees]... If it keeps going like this, I worry that there will be less and less rubber business in our area.

News

WAGARU VILLAGE FARMER'S APPEAL FOR JUSTICE FALLS ON DEAF EARS



January 13, 2016

Thanbyuzayat: Five years ago, a member of a government-linked militia seized a half-acre piece of community land from Nai Kon Ru, a landowner who had for years been working on the land in Wagaru village, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State. Like many landowners across the country, he is still struggling to reclaim his land. Nai Kon Ru spoke to HURFOM amid growing frustration over the slow handling of his case and accusations of corruption among local officials handling appeals.

Initially, Nai Kon Ru's dispossession stemmed from problems over the recognition of customary land practices. In Mon tradition nearby communally owned pieces of land are often incorporated into farmers' plots, and are considered to belong to the cultivator even in the absence of an official land title registering that land in their name.

However, according to Nai Kon Ru, these customary practices were ignored by a militia member known as Nai Than Jae, who seized Nai Kon Ru's piece of community land as his own, despite the fact that Nai Kon Ru had cultivated the land for years.

Allegedly, Nai Than Jae also seized communally owned land from other farmers in the area. However, today Nai Kon Ru remains the only farmer whose land has not yet been returned to him.

Nai Kon Ru explained his frustration at Nai Than Jae's actions, yet indicated that Nai Than Jae was protected from punishment due to his close ties to local administration figures.

Nai Kon Ru stated, "We cannot tolerate how he just came and took land in our community. He acted like a second village head. We still cannot complain about it because he is close to the village head [...] Villagers here all agree that this land should belong to us and should be for us. We all work on pieces of [community] land that are near to us. But he just came and took advantage of us".

Nai Kon Ru reports that he has to date experienced little success in his appeals for justice, and suspects that Nai Than Jae's close connections to government figures are to blame for the poor handling of his case.

Speaking to HURFOM, Nai Kon Ru said, "It has been five years now since they came to seize and work on our land. Each year we have fought to reclaim

our land, but we have not succeeded because of Nai Than Jae's close relationship with our village head. Moulmein District [officials] told us to share the land. Our village head also told us to share the land [...] We know that we will get nothing, even if we go to report this in Thanbyuzayat, because he [Nai Than Jae] has close relationships everywhere".

Nai Kon Ru expressed disappointment at a general lack of outward support from other local farmers, saying, "The other farmers just stay neutral because their land was not taken. But they agree that the land should belong to us".

However, one local farmer, Nai Khaung Chon, spoke out in Nai Kon Ru's defense, detailing that he had experienced similar problems, "The piece of [community] land is Nai Kon Ru's farmland and it should belong to him. They tried to take some of my [community] land [...] But they returned my land after they failed to seize it. Only Nai Kon Ru's land has not been returned".

Nai Khaung Chon concluded, "He [Nai Than Jae] didn't have any land here, so he just came to take some of our land. It is not right at all".

YEBYU TOWNSHIP VILLAGERS SPEAK OUT ABOUT SPLINTER GROUP EXTORTION

January 22, 2016

Yebyu: On the border of southern Ye Township, Mon State and northern Yebyu Township, Tenasserim Region, villagers are beginning to speak out about frequent demands for money from Mon splinter groups.

Residents in small villages along the seacoast have complained about a lack of protection from Mon splinter factions, who demand huge amounts of money from villagers up to three or four times per year. Speaking to HURFOM, villagers said that the threat is so severe that many have considered moving to other areas to escape the splinter groups' reach.

The coastal area between southern Ye Township and northern Yebyu Township, where the New Mon State Party (NMSP) has wielded influence since 1987, has been marked out as a black area since the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) era, due to splinter groups' prolific activities.

Today, splinter groups still regularly extort money from villagers in the region. According to data given by village administrators, from October 2014 to April 2015 splinter groups extorted a total of 28 million Kyat from five different villages, as well as five Kyat-thar of gold and several mobile phones.

Also in this period, the village administrator on Kywe Thone Nyi Ma island received two separate letters from splinter groups, each demanding 40 million Kyat. The second letter, received on April 16, 2015, was signed by the Asaung and Alwin (Nai Loon) groups.

The village administrator of Kywe Thone Nyi Ma explained that around 10 households have moved away from the island in response to the threat posed by splinter groups.

"They demand millions of Kyat," said Nai De Dot, a 55-year-old rubber plantation worker from Mae Taw village, "It is like they assume we villagers have a machine to produce money. Even if we could sell our rubber leaves for a Kyat per leaf, it would still be difficult to raise the amounts of money they demand. No matter how difficult life is for us, we always have to pay them. Even the village head and monks cannot live in peace. If we don't pay them, we can't live in peace, and instead we have to worry about when they will come to kill us."

Villagers expressed concerns that small villages in the area risk falling behind in terms of development due to constant threats of attack and extortion.

A resident from Mae Taw village, who wished to remain anonymous, said, "Villagers are too frightened to go to their farms and plantations. They are

planning to move to other places. They just leave their farms with their relatives. Some put their land up for sale."

According to Nai Ah Htun, a 49-year-old plantation owner based in Ah Mae village, the splinter groups thrive due to a strong network of informants in coastal villages and on ships along the seashore.

Nai Ah Htun expressed his frustration that local military and major armed groups have failed to protect villagers, saying, "We don't understand why the New Mon State Party and government military can't get rid of these small splinter groups [...] Where are the security services from the nearby Mawrawaddy battalions No. 42 and 43?"

"We have to pay [the splinter groups] a huge amount of money, from our money that we earn from our hard work. Not just one year, but every year. This is not right at all. It is time for them to stop. We would like to ask government armed groups and ceasefire armed groups to help us."

Another villager echoed these frustrations, "Every time splinter groups come to extort money, we hear that the nearby Mawrawaddy Navy will provide security. But we never hear anything about what they have done to get rid of the groups."

VOTERS HIGHLIGHT POOR COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY IN THANBYUZAYAT TOWNSHIP LOCAL ELECTIONS

January 28, 2016

Villagers in Mon State's Thanbyuzayat Township have complained about a lack of communication and transparency in recent local elections.

Throughout January, Thanbyuzayat Township residents have taken part in elections to select new village heads, in polls that will cover 41 village tracts. According to Thanbyuzayat Township's administrator, the elections will run from January 12 to 31, and have so far been completed in 39 village tracts.

However, locals have complained about poor communication and transparency in election processes, pointing the finger of blame to incumbent village heads.

Voters expressed worries that incumbent administrators have compromised processes in a bid to secure their own re-election. "It should not be this way," said one villager, "it is against the rules. There is no transparency."

So far, 14 incumbent village admini

strators have been re-elected to their posts.

The Township Administrator's office confirmed reports of foul play by former administrators and their clerks. According to the Deputy Head of the Township Administration Office, "The elections have not taken place systematically. No one has exact information about which date elections will take place. They just hold the elections when it is convenient for them."

MON PARLIAMENTARIAN VOWS TO STAND WITH MON ACTIVISTS IN FIGHT AGAINST MCL CEMENT FACTORY

March 1, 2016

HURFOM: Mon National Party (MNP) parliamentarian Nai Soi Ha has announced his commitment to standing alongside Mon community members, as they fight a planned coal-fired cement factory in Mon State’s Kyiakmayaw Township.

The cement factory, planned by Mawlamyine Cement Limited (MCL) is set to be located between Kaw Don and Kaw Panor villages in Kyiakmayaw Township, Mon State. MCL, a subsidiary of the well-established Siam Cement Group, say that the factory is due to open in mid 2016.

In recent weeks local residents joined together to oppose the project, after news surfaced that it would be operated using electricity generated from an on-site coal power plant.

Mi Ni Ni, from Kaw Don village, expressed, “We [the villagers] didn’t know that the factory would include a coal plant to produce electricity. The company didn’t tell us anything like that. That is why there was no opposition to the company [at first]. However, after we heard the news that the factory would use a coal-fired power plant, we decided that we didn’t want the factory in our village.”

Mon and Burmese media exposed plans for the coal plant earlier this month, which had been kept hidden from local villagers in a bid to prevent opposition to the project. According to locals, MCL also used other tactics in their attempts to keep villagers on side, including providing support to local development projects.

MNP parliamentarian Nai Soi Ha, who

sits in the House of Nationalities, expressed his support for local groups opposing the project, explaining, “There are now [plans for] two coal-fired power plants in our Mon region, in An Din [village], Ye Township, and in Kyiakmayaw Township. If the people don’t support these factories, we will stand with our people and work together to fight the projects. We will bring this issue to discussions in the coming session of parliament.”

The dispute in Kyiakmayaw Township represents the second time in recent years that local community members have rallied against foreign investors planning to introduce coal-fired power to rural parts of Mon State. In January of this year Toyo-Thai paused their plans to build a coal plant in An Din village, Ye Township, following a year of vocal opposition from local activists.



News

FEMALE CANDIDATE BEATS MALE COMPETITION IN MON STATE VILLAGE POLL



January 20, 2016

WCRP: On Sunday Mi Ja Lon Htaw, a former schoolteacher and Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) administrator, beat male opponents to be elected administrator of Tarana village tract, located in Kyiakmayaw Township, Mon State.

41-year-old Mi Ja Lon Htaw, also known as Mi Than Htay, beat off competition from three male candidates to win the election with 145 votes. The win constituted a rare victory in a village hierarchy usually dominated by male leaders.

Mi Ja Lon Htaw detailed that the victory had come as a surprise, saying, "I didn't think I could get this many votes. On election day there were fewer female voters than male voters, so I thought I

would not win. But when we counted the votes I won with 145 votes. I am happy that the villagers supported me as a female leader."

She added, "It is rare in our community to have a female [village] administrator. I would like to be a role model for young women, to show them that women can work in politics and administration too. Also, I want to get rid of the belief that women shouldn't be village administrators or leaders of the village. Then, both myself and others want to see what will change in the village with a female administrator."

Mi Ja Lon Htaw completed Grade 7 in Tarana village tract's government school and in 1993 continued her education at a Mon National School. She served as an MNEC Mon language

teacher in Kyiakmayaw Township for 18 years, from 1997 to 2015, and from 2011 to 2015 acted as MNEC's Deputy Education Administrator for Thaton District.

"I didn't think I could get this many votes. On election day there were fewer female voters than male voters, so I thought I would not win. But when we counted the votes I won with 145 votes. I am happy that the villagers supported me as a female leader."

News

CHILD LABOUR RIFE ON SETSE BEACH



January 19, 2016

WCRP: In the town surrounding Setse Beach, located in Mon State’s Thanbyuzayat Township, concerns are being raised that children are increasingly being employed to service the popular beach’s burgeoning tourist industry.

Children employed on Setse Beach are known to work renting horses, bicycles and beach toys to visitors.

One child employed on Setse Beach spoke to WCRP, giving a detailed picture of child labour in the area.

Eight-year-old Mg Soe Aung, who is employed renting horses to visitors, explained, “Our boss gives me 1500 Kyat per day, but sometimes they give me 5000, 10,000 or 20,000. It depends on how many visitors we have.”

Like many other children employed in Burma’s substantial child workforce, children employed on Setse Beach do not go to school, instead being forced into work early due to family livelihood difficulties.

“We come from Kyaikto,” said Mg Soe Aung, “my parents worked on other people’s farms. We were poor daily workers. This year my parents got in touch with a friend in Setse and we moved here.”

He continued, “My parents work as photographers and in a shop. They work at everything to get money [...] My job is better than my last job because I get a daily income. But it is only just enough for our family’s daily food. We don’t have any extra money to save. I will keep working in this job for my family. I will work here as long as my boss lets me.”



Information on HURFOM and Invitation for Feedbacks from Readers

Dear Readers,

Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) was founded in 1995, by a group of young Mon people, The main objectives of HURFOM are:

- ☐ Monitoring the human rights situation in Mon territory and other areas in southern Burma
- ☐ Protecting and promoting internationally recognized human rights in Burma,

In order to implement these objectives, HURFOM produces the monthly "Mon Forum" newsletters. If publication is delayed it is because we are waiting to confirm information, and it comes with our heartfelt apologies.

We encourage you to write to us if you have feedback or if you know someone who you think would like to receive the newsletter.

Please email or mail a name and address to:

HURFOM, P.O. Box 35, Sangkhalburi Post Office,

Kanchanaburi, 71240 Thailand

E-mail: info@rehmonnya.org

Website: <http://www.rehmonnya.org>

With regards,

Director

Human Rights Foundation of Monland

VILLAGERS DISPUTE RE-ELECTION OF SOUTHERN YE VILLAGE ADMINISTRATOR

January 14, 2016

Ye: Villagers in Kyon Nyae village tract, located in southern Ye, Mon State, have expressed disapproval over the re-election of their sitting Village Administrator, Nai Htun Kyi, who has served in his post for over 10 years. While the village committee remains supportive of Nai Htun Kyi, a group of villagers are preparing to send a letter of complaint to various government departments, demanding the election of a new village head.

Nai Htun Kyi, who also serves as one of ten local household administrators, was last week re-elected to his position as Village Administrator of Kyon Nyae village tract, in a poll that was made available to all residents. Kyon Nyae village tract is comprised of five villages: Toetat, Ywar Thit, Kabyar Wa, Tayote Htaung, and Mee-Tai-That. According to villagers, Village Administrator Nai Htun

Kyi has served in his post for the past 10 to 15 years.

Nai Kong Sakar, one of the villagers preparing to pen a petition against Nai Htun Kyi, explained, "We villagers want to elect a new village head. The current elected village head has been our leader for a long time, since the era of the Village Peace and Development Council. It is always him who gets elected over and over again for this position. We want a change."

While Nai Htun Kyi was democratically re-elected to his position, the complainants allege that Nai Htun Kyi abused his position and connections to win votes. They claim that villagers are afraid of Nai Htun Kyi, who is thought to be well connected with various government figures, including the local police and nearby Light Infantry Battalion No. 31.

"Five years ago, it was him. Now, it is still him," said Nai Kong Sakar, "We just cannot tolerate him always taking the position. We plan to send a letter, but we are still getting advice about where we should send it. Some colleagues suggested that we should not send it yet, because soon a new government will take office and it would be better to send the letter to our parliament representative when the new government takes office. This is not bad advice. We are discussing whether or not to wait."

Nai Kong Sakar concluded, "The villagers are ready to sign our petition. They agree with us, and support us wherever we go and whatever we do. We are preparing our letter to dethrone the old leader."

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATED IN MOULMEIN



March 9, 2016

On March 8, 2016, 200 participants gathered in Moulmein to celebrate International Women's Day.

The event, held at a vocational training school, was organised by Rangoon-based organisation Phan Tee Eain. Participants included representatives from the Department of Social Welfare, UN Women, European Commission, World Vision, Marie Stopes International, Tricaire and Mahaythi Women's Development Centre (WDC).

Municipal Minister Dr. Toe Toe Aung was also in attendance, as well as other members of local government departments.

The event included a speech by Phan Tee Eain coordinator Daw Khin Lay Nwe Tun on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in

addition to a presentation by author U Hwe Nyan about worldwide gender equality.

Municipal Minister Dr Toe Toe Aung explained, "The purpose of the event is to recognize the role of women and their success, and to encourage their capacity and cooperation in problem solving."

Similar celebrations were held in other townships throughout Burma, including Hpa-An, Lashio, Kalay and Loikaw.

The celebration marked the 105th commemoration of International Women's Day. The first Women's Day was observed in the United States on February 28, 1909, after protests in 1908 by female garment workers in New York against disenfranchisement, pay and working conditions.

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