
Thailand's New 'Forestry Master Plan': Same old strategy dressed up in new clothes

On 31 July 2014, the 'Forestry Master Plan' (FMP) was issued by Thailand's Internal Security Operations Command and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. There was no consultation with the public or civil society before the drafting of this plan, nor was there any kind of referendum or public consultation after the plan was finalized.

The Forestry Plan aims to "resolve the problems of forest destruction, trespassing of public land and sustainable management of natural resources". The over-arching goal of this plan is to "increase the forest cover" in Thailand from its current level of 33% of the country (17.1 million hectares) to 40% (20.5 million hectares) within 10 years.

The three stated objectives of the FMP are:

1. To stop forest degradation and reclaim illegally used forest lands as stated in the goal within one year.
2. To establish efficient, effective and sustainable forest management systems within two years
3. To re-establish healthy forests in the country during the next 2-10 years.

In its action plan, the FMP designates 'crisis zones'- areas that the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) believes have large numbers of forest encroachment cases and illegal logging. Northern Thailand is home to most of these 'crisis zones', which has made forest dependent community members fearful that actions will soon be taken against them, if they have not already begun. Another troublesome aspect of the FMP, specially for Northern Thai forest communities, is that RFD officials will be relying on outdated aerial surveillance maps to determine whether a community has encroached on 'State lands'.

Furthermore, the FMP action plan states that the RFD will need to increase its resources (staff, vehicles, weapons, radios, GPS devices, etc.) in order that the action plan be successfully implemented. The RFD has submitted a budget to the government to support this request.

Evictions, Arrests, Detentions, Fines

Since the issuance of the FMP, soldiers from the Thai military and RFD officers have been frequently raiding communities and arresting villagers, and quickly moving onto their next targets, to avoid confrontation with other locals. The Northern Peasants' Federation (NPF), a network of Thai small scale farming communities from 9 Northern Thai provinces, has observed that the RFD has been targeting indigenous communities first (Lisu, Lahu, and Karen peoples were the first to be arrested

and issued eviction notices). During past 'crackdowns' by the Thai military/RFD, entire communities were evicted, but this time, the RFD/Army are targeting individuals within communities, which has created discord and disunity among these communities.

According to the Internal Security Operations Command, 501 people have been arrested and prosecuted for forest and public land encroachment since the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) took power in May 2014, while 55,000 hectares of land has been confiscated in 68 provinces. In the North, over 200 cases have been filed against forest community members, mostly for possession of illegal wood. Many of the persons accused do not understand why these charges have been filed against them, as they feel that they had been living within the rules.

The more things change, the more they stay the same...

The FMP is the latest in a long line of attempts by the Thai RFD and Army to evict forest dwellers. For example, in the early 1990s, also following a military coup, the Army and RFD cooperated to implement the "Kho Cho Ko" program (1) in Northeast Thailand. The project wanted to 'relocate' people from 'protected' forest areas and watersheds as well as so-called degraded forest lands. In total, the project planned to 'relocate' about 6 million people living in 9,700 forest communities from their dwelling in 1,253 forest areas all over Thailand. Under the "Kho Cho Ko" program, villager's houses were demolished and they were forcibly evicted in order to "reforest" the degraded forests with monoculture plantations of fast-growing tree species such as eucalyptus. The evictions resulted in large-scale protests by affected communities which, backed by accurate information about the impacts of the programme, finally forced the government to withdraw the "Ko Cho Ko" program in 1992.

Update

On November 9th, NPF planned the march "Walking for Land Justice" in order to ask for a cessation of the Forestry Master Plan until a review and public consultation, as well as support for the "Four Laws for the Poor" campaign (2). The walk, however, was halted by the Army after the first group of farmers had walked a mere 5 meters outside of the gathering place. Two participants- Chulalongkorn University political science lecturer Prapart Pintobtang and Phrae forest group's member Pisist Taja were arrested and held in a police truck for 30 minutes before being released. After hours of negotiations between the Thai Army and NPF, it was agreed that the walk would be postponed in exchange for a negotiation meeting between a key member of the government- Prime Minister's Office Minister ML Panadda Diskul- and NPF representatives at the Chiang Mai provincial hall on November 13th.

On November 13th, farmer representatives met with ML Panadda Diskul and explained their current grievances and the threats they have faced as a result of the FMP. He agreed to arrange for the release of the 19 indigenous Karen villagers who were still in detention in Mae Hongson Province, as well as to present the farmer's issues to the relevant agencies and officers in Bangkok. It was also agreed at this meeting that the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, Gen Dapong Ratanasuwan, would come to Chiang Mai on November 17th, for discussing the FMP.

Prior to all of the events and meetings that have occurred in Chiang Mai during November, the Thai Army has visited NPF members at their office and warned them not to carry banners, wear campaign shirts, chant slogans, or even hold up four fingers in support of the "Four Laws for the Poor" during their gatherings. While the negotiations were occurring inside the Chiang Mai Provincial Hall on November 13th, Thai military walked among the villagers waiting outside and ordered them to sit apart

in groups of less than 5 persons while they were waiting.

Final Remarks

At NPF, we agree with the RFD that Thailand's forests are dwindling and need to be protected. However, the persons and groups responsible for the continuing degradation of Thailand's forest lands are not small scale farmers and villagers, but are land speculators, resort and plantation owners. They should be the target of any State plan to rehabilitate and conserve forest lands. Instead of implementing repressive 'Forestry Management' schemes which harm the real forest protectors, we recommend the adopting of the "Four Laws for the Poor", which aim to support community-based land and natural resource management- the most just and sustainable method to maintain Thailand's precious forests and environment.

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(1) "Kho Cho Ko" is the Thai acronym for the longwinded "Farmland Allotment Program for the Poor Living in Degraded Protected Forest Areas"

(2) See <http://www.landjustice4thai.org/4laws.php> for more information on this campaign