
Burma: The greening of the military junta by the Wildlife Conservation Society

The remote and environmentally rich Hugawng valley in Burma's northern Kachin State has been internationally recognized as one of the world's hotspots of biodiversity. It even remained largely untouched by Burma's military regime until the mid-1990s.

After a ceasefire between the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and the junta in 1994, local residents had high hopes that peace would foster the economy and improve living conditions. However, as Valley of Darkness, a new report by undercover local researchers published in 2007 by the Kachin Development Networking Groups, says: "Under the junta's increased control, the rich resources of the valley turned out to be a curse".

The military junta ruling Burma, together with the US-based Wildlife Conservation Society, is establishing the world largest tiger reserve: the Hugawng Valley Tiger Reserve. However, the conditions of the people living there have received no attention. The report exposes that Burma's military junta has confiscated farmlands and homes there to accommodate its military infrastructure, and is selling off vast tracts as gold-mining concessions -- offering up 18% of the entire Kachin State for mining concessions in 2002, with major ones increasing in number from 14 in 1994 to 31 in 2006. The valley's forests and waterways are now being ravaged by over 100 hydraulic and pit mines using mechanized pumps and dredges and dumping mercury-contaminated tailings.

Devastating impacts are felt not only by the environment but also by local communities. "Only the junta and a handful of businessmen are benefiting from the gold while the local people suffer the consequences", says the report, while the influx of thousands of desperate migrants from all over Burma, together with harsh working conditions, a lack of education opportunities and poverty have led to the expansion of the drug, sex, and gambling industries in the once pristine valley. Intravenous drug use and the sex industry have increased the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Wildlife Conservation Society is claiming that Burma's junta has almost completely closed down the gold-mining industry in the valley. This report proves otherwise, documenting local people speaking out about the fundamental lack of local benefit from or participation in the so called "border area development program", of which the military junta continually boasts.

"We want the world to know that both tigers and people in the Hugawng valley are being endangered by Burma's military regime," stresses the report.

Excerpted and edited from: "Valley of Darkness. Gold mining and militarization in Burma's Hugawng Valley", 2007, Kachin Development Networking Groups (KDNG), e-mail: kdngroup@gmail.com. The full report is available at: www.aksyu.com

