
Burma: Ceasefire, Logging and Mining Concessions in Kachin State

Kachin State in northern Burma (Myanmar) is currently undergoing dramatic ecological change. Kachin State contains one of mainland Southeast Asia's last remaining large areas of intact natural forests, and is one of the eight "hottest hotspots of biodiversity" in the world. But the hotspot is now under threat since one of Burma's largest and best organized ethnic political groups, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), agreed to a ceasefire with the Burmese military regime (State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC) in 1994 that allows the KIO to retain its arms and have some territorial sovereignty while surrendering legal control of natural resources to the SPDC. Ceasefire concessions offering rights to exploit Kachin State's exceptionally rich natural resources enticed a few Kachin elites to agree to a ceasefire. That is why one Kachin elder believes "if there was no ceasefire agreement, we would have no environmental crisis."

A Kachin youth simply explains: "When there was fighting in Kachin State there was no chance to take the trees out." Now that warfare no longer deters natural resource extraction, logging and mining have drastically increased in pace and scale, with a recent report estimating no less than 500,000 m³ of timber every year passing across the Kachin border into Yunnan, China.

Two key reasons are China's soaring economic growth and Yunnan's logging ban in 1998, which has forced China to import timber from northern Burma in order to feed its insatiable consumer demand. Another reason is that the ceasefire required the KIO to switch from jade mining, previously its primary source of income, to granting logging concessions in order to continue to support itself and its armed branch, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). "The KIA mostly funded themselves through jade; but after the ceasefire agreement they took trees instead." A KIA official further explains: "After the ceasefire, local people don't have a chance to mine [jade]. The miners are now Burmese because the Burmese government controls the jade mines and gives contracts to Burmese companies." In addition, the SPDC has granted many gold mining concessions to Chinese companies, which poison rivers and people with mercury.

The political coziness between former battlefield enemies enables cooperative plundering of natural resources, benefiting a few Burmese, Kachin and Chinese elites at the expense of local Kachins. This collusion of elite networks after the ceasefire shifted control over forests away from Kachin village headmen to the KIO, SPDC and Chinese officials and businessmen. The Burmese regime and the KIO try to justify the ceasefire concessions to local Kachin through offering "extractive development" packages, such as infrastructure. In reality, however, "The only thing the Kachin people get is roads to get the trees out." Ceasefire concessions highlight how an end to war, which is obviously beneficial to people, opens opportunities for natural resource extraction and its related environmental degradation. The situation is so severe that a Kachin leader believes "the environment is the most important issue in Kachin State right now." A Kachin doctor agrees, but added an extra caution: "Most Kachin people are very concerned about the environmental situation, but they can not complain. If they complain, they get the bullet or go to jail."

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