
Burma: Forced labour in oil palm plantations

On 13 June this year, Amnesty International released a report on Burma titled "Myanmar. Ethnic minorities: targets of repression." The report states that for the last 13 years this organization has documented "the widespread use of forced labour of ethnic minorities by the Myanmar military" and adds that "perhaps the most common human rights violation of ethnic minorities is forced labour of civilians, who are much more likely to be seized by the army than the majority Burman group."

According to Amnesty International, "there are two broad types of forced labour: the first is portering, which entails carrying heavy loads for the military over rough terrain for days or weeks at a time. The second type involves work on construction projects such as roads, railways, and dams. Men, women, and children are all taken for labour duties, and almost never paid for their work."

Organizations such as the Karen National Union and Free Burma Coalition have identified oil palm plantations among the many types of activities being carried out forcibly by local people. In February 1999, the Vice Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council (Burma's military regime) General Maung Aye was accompanied by national entrepreneurs on a field trip to reclaim "vacant, virgin and fallow lands" for cultivation of crops in Taninthayi Division. Gen. Maung Aye said that "the land between Kauthaung and Myeik is appropriate for cultivation of edible oil palm on commercial scale, and should local entrepreneurs establish edible oil palm plantations on thousands of acres, it is sure that Taninthayi Division would become the "edible oil pot" of the country like Magway Division". He assured that the government would provide support for success of local entrepreneurs implementing the projects in accord with the economic objectives of the State. Local entrepreneurs also explained the tentative plan to cultivate oil palm on 400,000 acres in the division and the chosen sites.

The Vice Chairman has certainly kept his promise of "providing support". On 27 July 2000, SPDC's troops ordered villagers from Thagyet and Kyeinchaung villages to work for a military oil palm plantation at Kyeinchaung area. 70 persons from Thagyet, 50 from Nyaungbingwin, 30 from Thebotleik, 50 from Kamukru, 30 from Kyauktalone villages were demanded to go and work in turn. The oil palm plantation has a 55,500 acre extension.

Since January 2001, SPDC have started another oil palm plantation plan in Tanawthiri township (Taninthayi) in Mergui district, Tenasserim division. The planned area to clear are in the surroundings of Thaboleik, Leikpu, Htiho-awmay, Kabawplaw villages in the east of Taninthayi town and the villagers from those related villages were ordered to clear the plantation site. The area of plantation was not known yet. SPDC authorities are working for Yan Naing Myint Co. and have ordered their local militia to take responsibility for the operation. SPDC had ordered all the local village tracts nearby to plant the oil palm saplings when the site was ready. Every household must go and plant the sapling from the beginning to the end.

This is clearly the most extreme case of exploitation and human rights violations related to oil palm plantations and the international community needs to be made aware of the situation. Organizations campaigning against large-scale oil palm monocultures should take the Burmese case on board to

provide support for those communities facing such abuses.

Article based on information from: Amnesty International. "Myanmar. Ethnic minorities: targets of repression." OpenDocument&of=COUNTRIES%5CMYANMAR) ; Free Burma Coalition. "Forced Labor", Karen National Union, 17 March, 2001, "SPDC's Oil Palm Plantation", Myanmar Information Committee, Information Sheet A-0793(1), 8/2/99, "National Entrepreneurs Urged to Cultivate Edible Oil Palm, Rubber on Commercial Scale in Taninthayi Division".