

New report: Moratorium on natural resource projects in ethnic states will help end ethnic conflict

In a report launched today, the Burma Environmental Working Group is calling for a halt to natural resource projects in the conflict-torn ethnic states until a Union Peace Accord has been signed and a new federal constitution adopted.

The report *Resource Federalism* lays out a road map towards sustainable management of natural resources, an issue integral to solving the decades-long ethnic conflict in Burma. Using community case studies, the report analyzes the current constitutional and legislative framework in six key sectors: forests, land, water, minerals, gems and oil and natural gas.

Bilateral ceasefires with ethnic armed groups in resource rich ethnic areas have unleashed rampant natural resource exploitation, especially in the hydropower, mining and agribusiness sectors. Controlled by the central government and secured by their armed forces, these natural resource projects have expanded Naypyitaw's political, economic and military domination.

Natural resource exploitation sparked the breakdown of the 17-year long Kachin ceasefire in 2011 and military offensives continue unabated into resource rich areas of Burma's northern region displacing hundreds of thousands of people.

"The mad rush of investment into ethnic areas before substantial and inclusive political dialogue is like a smash and grab operation that threatens the entire peace process," said Khun Oo of the Pa-Oh Youth Organization, "A moratorium on large-scale natural resource projects would help safeguard community lands and livelihoods as a foundation for building lasting peace and sustainable development."

Ethnic communities suffering land grabbing, human rights abuses and loss of livelihoods from projects have organized numerous petitions and public demonstrations, but these have been ignored by the government in favor of superficial impact assessments carried out by companies.

"Current environmental legislation ensures no democratic rights to communities to reject projects. Impact assessments are just used to rubber stamp investments," said HKaw Lwi of the BEWG member BRIDGE. Burma does not need to start from zero in developing federal governance structures which can manage land and natural resources sustainably. Local communities and autonomous ethnic administrations have existing systems and laws in place to protect their environment.

"We need a new federal constitution which ensures that ownership, control and management of lands and natural resources is put into the hands of state and local authorities, who can be accountable to affected communities," said Tsa Ji of the Kachin Development Networking Group.

BEWG is a network of ten civil society organizations primarily working in the ethnic conflict-affected areas of Burma. It was formed 2005 to develop and advocate for policies that protect the livelihoods, natural resources and environment of affected communities and promote their participation in decision-making.

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The report and briefer in Burmese and English are available at www.bewg.org

