

Catalyst for Conflict

Investments cause renewed war, threatening Ta'ang communities in northern Burma



photo by TSYO

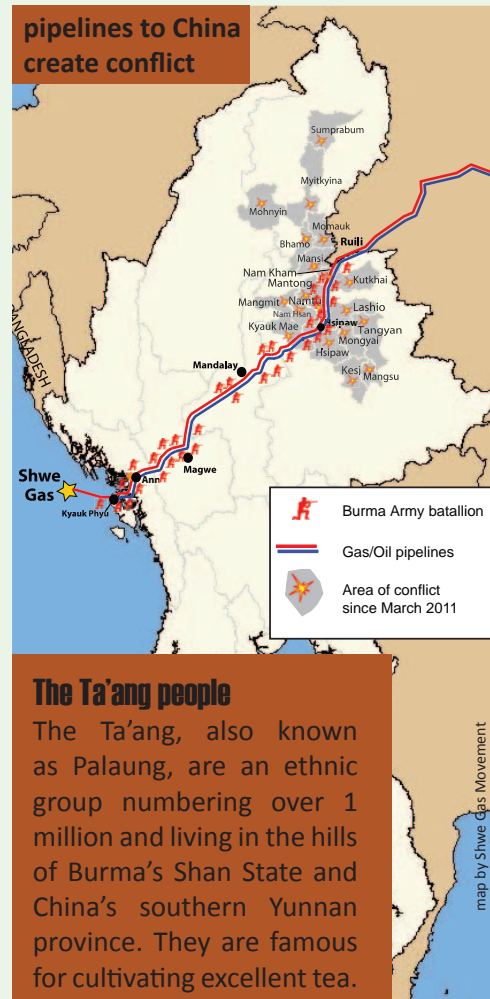
Despite recent ceasefire agreements and talk of reform in Burma, since January 2012 ethnic Ta'ang areas of northern Burma have experienced increasing militarization and conflict. Fierce battles have broken out in areas that have not seen fighting for over 20 years. Soldiers from the Burma Army have moved from their main bases to live in villages and now regularly patrol local areas, increasing abuses against local populations including killings, beatings, forced labor, and extortion.

The military expansion is directly linked to securing Chinese mega projects. Pipelines that will take oil and gas from Burma to China are currently being built in Ta'ang areas. China is also building two mega dams on the Shweli, the most important river for the Ta'ang, while loggers are cutting down precious teak forests in Ta'ang areas to export timber to China.

Control over natural resources and abuses by the Burma Army are at the heart of local grievances in both Kachin and Shan states where conflict has erupted. In July 2011, a new army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), was formed under the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) to protect the Ta'ang people. In March this year, pro-government militias in Mantong were given Burma Army weapons to fight the TNLA, using a divide and rule tactic which creates conflict among the Ta'ang people.

As fighting and abuses increase, local people are fleeing for their safety. Since December 2011, over 1,000 have become internally displaced, sheltering in Nam Kham and Mantong. Many have also fled to China, particularly young men avoiding forced conscription and portering. This has had devastating impacts on the annual tea harvest, a critical economic activity for the Ta'ang.

People in northern Shan State, especially in rural areas, have failed to benefit from the much talked about reform in central Burma. Investments are increasing conflict and abuses while not providing benefit to local people.





Burmese police guard Shweli Dam 1

Dams

After completing a 600 MW dam on the upper Shweli River in 2008, Chinese companies, with Swiss hydro giant Colenco, are planning two more dams downstream. Fighting near the Dam 2 site in July 2011 forced Chinese workers to leave but Burma's Asia World Company is now building a Chinese worker camp at Dam 3.

Burma Army battalions are increasing patrols around dam sites, committing grave human rights violations.



photo by TSYO

Burma Army patrols a Ta'ang village

Burmese soldiers harass and interrogate local people travelling to their farms at two checkpoints near Dam 1. Troops from Light Infantry Battalion 144 guarding Dam 1 now regularly patrol near the Dam 2 site.

In January, the TNLA ambushed and killed five Burmese soldiers from Infantry Battalion (IB) 302 from Momeik who were patrolling near the Shweli Dam 3 site. In March, the TNLA cooperated with Kachin and Shan armies to attack IB 130 near Dam 3, causing three deaths and 10 injuries.

On March 13, two villagers coming back from fishing near the Dam 3 site were stopped and interrogated by soldiers from IB 130 on suspicion of supporting armed groups. Both men were shot and killed by the junior battalion commander. The senior commander then threatened the men's families and fellow villagers not to publicize news of the deaths.

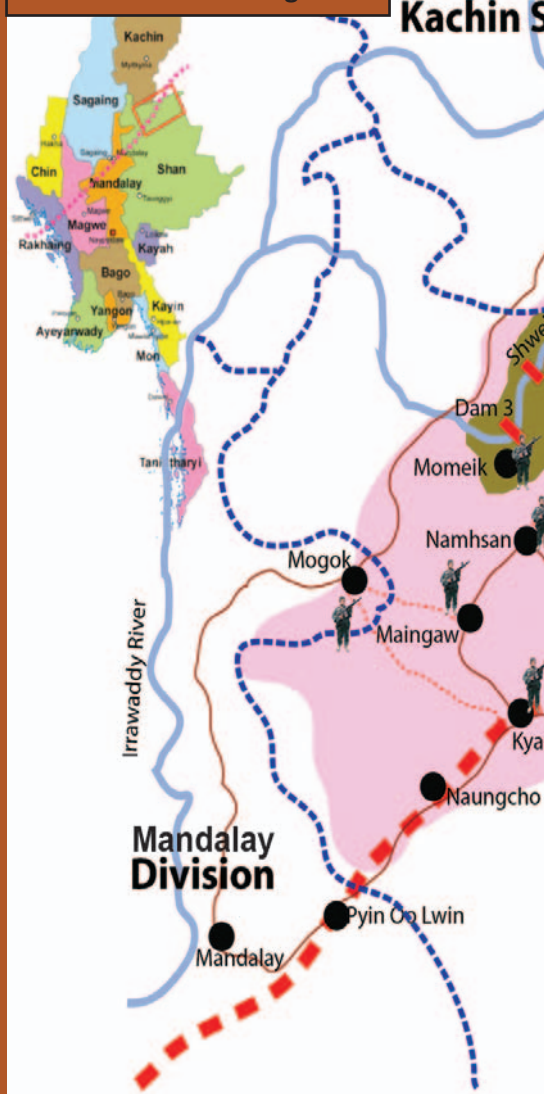
Conflict re-ignites

March 2011 Fighting between the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) and Burma Army breaks a 22-year ceasefire. By August, over 30,000 are newly displaced. New ceasefire talks are ongoing yet periodic clashes continue.

June 2011 The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Burma Army battle near a Chinese dam in Kachin State, ending a 17-year ceasefire. Burmese deploy new troops and clashes are ongoing; to date 75,000 have been displaced.

July 2011 The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) forms to protect Ta'ang people from abuses after the Palaung State Liberation Army signed a ceasefire in 1991 and was forced to disarm in 2005.

Militarization in Ta'ang areas



"Over 200 soldiers came into the market turning it into a sea of green uniforms - there were more soldiers than local people." (woman at Maimaw market)

Logging

Chinese logging "bosses" pay bribes to Burma's government and the Burma Army for logging in Ta'ang areas. At first teak forests, all hardwoods, even smaller sized trees, are being deforested.

Drug traders are selling drugs to loggers and addicts. Sex work and gambling are also spreading. Logging trucks are destroying local roads; villagers are not getting paid for roads without getting paid.

In March, the TNLA burned ten Chinese logging camps. One TNLA leader said "there is no benefit from the logging so we want to send them away."



photo by TSYO

Pipelines

China is currently building pipelines from Arakan State across Burma through Ta'ang areas to import oil and gas. Burma Army soldiers based in Namtu, Nam Kham, Kyaukme, Mantong, Naungcho and Lashio are fanning out to secure the pipeline, abusing local villagers while protecting Chinese workers. Meanwhile thousands of acres of farmlands have been confiscated along the route.

Burmese soldiers work as bodyguards for Chinese company

In Namtu and Nam Kham, Chinese companies are paying 5,000 kyat per day to Burma Army soldiers from Kyaukme and Namtu battalions to secure construction areas. It is rumored that higher-ranked military personnel are paid at least 10,000 kyat per day.

Soldiers securing pipeline route demand money for using roads

In April Burmese soldiers from Lashio Battalion 68 securing the pipeline route from Namtu to Maimaw began threatening and demanding money from villagers and traders using the local road. One local tea trader explained: *"When we arrived at the entrance of the village, Burmese soldiers responsible for the gas pipeline security demanded money for alcohol although they were already drunk. They said if we couldn't pay, we would not be allowed to pass."*

People have to travel long distances to avoid soldiers guarding the pipelines

An increase in checkpoints and questioning on local roads is forcing local people from Nam Kham and Namtu townships to travel long distances in order to reach their destinations without trouble. Local markets are also now filled with soldiers who intimidate local shoppers.

Forced labor for pipeline in Namtu

In February residents from Block 8 of Namtu town were forced to carry equipment and dig drains for the gas pipeline construction by the local chairman U Mya Maung. The order was given by U Chit Lwin of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Namtu police and Burma Army Infantry Battalion 324 are in charge securing the construction area.

"We often see soldiers around my village. I am very worried for my daughter when she goes to the farm she has to pass soldiers. But if we don't go to the farm we can't get any food." (local woman)

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People flee conflict and abuse

Due to the recent fighting and increase in militarization in Ta'ang areas, villagers are fleeing for safety to nearby towns.

In December 2011, 500 people from villages in the Shan-Kachin border area fled to Nam Kham. They stayed in a local monastery and church and some stayed in relatives' houses. Local donors and monks in Nam Kham assisted the refugees as best they could but conditions were very difficult during the cold season. Since that time, most have moved to China to look for work or have returned to their home villages.

During January 2012, fighting between Mantong, Nam Kham and the Kachin border forced 200 people to flee to Ton Hone village. At the end of March 2012, over 400 people fled to Mantong town. Many Ta'ang people have also migrated to China fleeing mega development projects, human rights abuses and civil war.

Tea harvest lost

As countless youth have left their homes to migrate to China and the conflict has deterred migrant workers from central Burma who would normally come in April for the first tea leaf harvest, valuable tea is being left un-harvested. After years of monopolization and price controls from military-linked businessmen, this is another crippling blow to a traditional Ta'ang industry which is causing price plummets and impacting thousands of families. For example, since the beginning of the tea-picking season in 2012, the selling price of dry tea in Namhsan went from nearly 5,000 kyat to 2,500 kyat per viss.

TSYO calls

During this time when foreign investors are increasing their interest in Burma, they should recognize that human rights violations have actually increased in ethnic areas since Thein Sein's government came to power. We Ta'ang Students' and Youth Organization call for:

- A suspension of all current mega development projects, the withdrawal of all Burmese troops from Ta'ang areas, and a ceasefire by all parties to enable genuine political dialogue for a meaningful resolution of conflict in Burma.
- Any future investments to follow proper standards of free, prior, and informed consent, and have accountability and transparency.
- Vital humanitarian aid to reach the people displaced by the conflict in the Ta'ang area.



People displaced by fighting sheltering in Nam Kham

photo by TSYO



Preparing tea for market in Ta'ang village

photo by blog.laiveipod.com



photo by TSYO

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Report on pipelines coming soon
Ta'ang Students and Youth Organization
www.palaungland.org