



November 29, 2015

Today marks the third anniversary of the police crackdown at Letpadaung, a joint venture between Burmese and Chinese military companies to develop Southeast Asia's largest copper mine.

What began as peaceful demonstrations by thousands of monks and farmers from 26 affected villages ended with riot police firing incendiary white phosphorus weapons directly at protesters. More than 150 suffered horrific chemical burns, leaving some permanently disfigured. The victims of this shocking crime are still waiting for justice.

Deploying excessive force against citizens was commonplace under the military junta. What was so startling about the crackdown at Letpadaung was the use of chemical weapons at a time when Myanmar was allegedly transitioning to a more open and democratic system.

Widespread public outrage led President Thein Sein to establish a Government Commission of Inquiry chaired by opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, but its mandate was limited and did not include investigating the police action. The Commission did recommend positive steps to ensure environmental protection and fair compensation; unfortunately, its recommendations were not properly implemented, and perpetrators were never held accountable. Furthermore, many villagers have opted not to accept compensation, as they do not see it as solution for the loss of their sustainable livelihood.

Civil society groups like Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability (MATA) have continued to work in Letpadaung, documenting ongoing land grabs, empowering local communities to defend their rights, and promoting transparency and public participation in natural resource governance. Supporting these communities can carry high risks. For example, Ko Tint Aung Soe from MATA Sagain Division Working Group, has been charged with trespass and faces trial simply for helping communities negotiate with the companies.

Meanwhile, injured monks and villagers injured at Letpadaung remain determined to fight for redress. Justice Trust is bringing an unprecedented criminal and civil lawsuit on their behalf against General Ko Ko, Minister of Home Affairs for his leadership role in the violent crackdown.

The lawsuits have been blocked by authorities at every turn. The police refused to register a first information report (FIR), and judicial officers refused to authorize necessary court documents such as affidavits. Furthermore, the Special Branch threatened witnesses and intimidated many of the victims to withdraw from the lawsuits. Despite these barriers, Letpadaung communities and their supporters remain committed to seeking justice.

This is not an isolated case; it represents a key issue for the entire country: the need to uphold citizens' land rights and fundamental freedoms in the teeth of entrenched economic interests of military companies and their crony networks.

The new democratic government faces a critical challenge – to break up the military monopolies, and ensure that increased business opportunity and investment serve to enhance ordinary people's welfare and prosperity, rather than perpetuate human rights violations.

On this third anniversary of the Letpadaung crackdown, we call on the current and incoming governments to remember that whole communities across the country face illegal land confiscation, economic hardship, and environmental degradation. And all of them yearn for justice.

What happened in Letpadaung must never be allowed to happen again.