

**CASE STUDY OF
ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS
ASSESSMENT IN KACHIN
IN THE POST-COUP PERIOD**



**Myanmar Mining Watch Network (MMWN)
November 2021 - June 2022**

Myanmar Mining Watch Network (MMWN)

Myanmar Mining Watch Network (MMWN) is a social network which was established in 2016 at Myitkyina, Kachin State. It was formed by 11 organizations with the purpose of doing a mining advocacy campaign and creating a platform for learning and sharing resources for ethnicities in Myanmar. Currently, it is an organization composed of 14 network members.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Myanmar, the natural resource extractive industry has been operating with limited transparency and at high environmental and social costs for decades. There were some reforms from 2010 to 2020 during the previous civilian governments, but these have yet to be reflected in practice. To make matters worse, given the political and social crisis after the coup, the industry reverted to a weak regulatory system. This report discusses a case study in Kachin in the post-coup period.

In Kachin State, gold mining downstream of the Irrawaddy River confluence has seen an escalation of gold mining activities. The junta's military forces, and an affiliated militia are granting permits with an advance collection of taxes from gold miners. There is immediate destruction to the environment and the local habitat. Locally initiated anti-mining responses have been met with intimidation, assaults, and threats, and requests for compensation by locals have been denied. In this political and pandemic crisis, natural resources are increasingly extracted, illegally, at the significant expense of the environment and social wellbeing. In the case study, the military junta's security forces and its allied militias are the primary actors who allow the mining and collect direct taxation. They have no legitimacy to do so, and taxation should be managed only by the Internal Revenue Department, and the Union or State/Divisions of the National Unity Government (NUG)

issuing the mining permits.

However, currently, it is quite the opposite given the situations described in the above case study. This clearly shows that the military junta does not ensure the rule of law despite announcing itself as a caretaker in this interim period. Moreover, the military does not want the country to be an authentic federal democracy country. The military junta spends the collected revenues from natural resources on buying military equipment that is widely used to suppress civilians and particularly ethnic peoples and other minority groups.

If there is no effective law and regulations, illegal business and corruption will grow, land confiscations will continue, the number of migrant workers will increase, which will lead to increasing conflicts among different political and economic interest groups, as well as between local and migrant people and further exploitation of vulnerable groups, women and children. Without appropriate adaptation and mitigation, the damage, the impacts will soon be irreversible. If the mining continues at the current rate and manner, local communities in Kachin State is at a severe and fastly increasing risk of losing their livelihood, health, forest and water resources, Kachin cultural and historical heritage will disappear in the near future.

Recommendations are also included in this report because Myanmar Mining Watch Network (MMWN) urges the policy makers and civil society organizations from Myanmar as follow:

Preserve the significant places of cultural sites that are integral to Kachin Indigenous identity and history and the lifeblood river for

millions of Myanmar people living along the riverbanks.

Suspend gold and coal mining activities which could cause large environmental and social damages in Kachin state.

Abolish the 2018 Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VFN) Land Management Law in favor of ethnic communities.

Ensure the existing mining companies follow Environmental Conservation Law and Rules and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Procedure.

Facilitate a legal abiding Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of damages to the environment, health, livelihood, and education of the local people, especially vulnerable groups such as women and children.

Protect the people and groups who speak out for preservation of culture and environment of local communities in Kachin.

MMWN asks civil society in Myanmar and Mekong regions to act as the watchdog and raise awareness of ongoing damage to the environment, livelihood, health and Kachin communities and to empower locals to stand up and work collectively.

METHODOLOGY

After the coup on February 1st, 2021, in Myanmar, concerned members of the Myanmar Mining Watch Network (MMWN) discussed the importance of a rapid assessment of the escalating mining activities across the country. The following location was chosen based on access and safety:

Gold mining along the downstream of the Irrawaddy River confluence (Myitsonne) in Kachin State.

This report was only possible through close collaboration with local partners who are concerned about increasing mining operations in Kachin state.

The first phase of the fieldwork was carried out between 25 July to 27 August. The second and or validation phase was initiated in September 2021. This was a qualitative study and used in-person interviews and focus groups. Data collection was conducted primarily through a series of interviews using both individual and focus group interviews with local key informants, farmers, villagers, village headmen, religious leaders, and miners on-site. We interviewed (8) women and (9) men and collectively in focus groups (12) people with informants who have great insight into the issues and rich knowledge of Kachin state. They are between 45 and 60 years of age from different

socio-economic groups, geographic areas, ethnicities, and connections with the mining areas. MMWN collaborated with network members and locally based organizations in Kachin state. MMWN held a meeting via Zoom with network members and community leaders directly working on the ground to protect the environment and human rights before the interview process. Community leaders and locally-based organizations collaborate in recruiting interviewees, and we selected participants for random snowballing sampling during the whole process of the interview.

The interview process lasted over 4 weeks in Kachin and the MMWN research team was faced with many difficulties such as travel restrictions, and inconvenient transportation while traveling to field visits, so the teams could not go to some badly affected mines in the Myitsone area. The team also visited the Myitsone areas and examined (4) villages in the Nawnng Hkying village Tract, Wai Maw township, namely N-gan village, Maliyang, Hkang Bu village, N-Hpu Yang village, as well as Aung Min Thar and Tanghpree villages. The teams conducted in-person interviews with local communities from the Myitsone areas and collected data by taking notes and audio recordings.

The team traveled to the mining sites and observed the impact of social and environmental issues. Using semi-structured questions, the teams' interviews were in Kachin, or Burmese languages and all findings from the field visits were transcribed. The teams thematically

analyzed the data and organized findings based on the questions asked and categorized them according to the themes identified.

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Case Study – Gold Mining Downstream of the Irrawaddy

River Confluence (Kachin State)

1. Mining Activity and Methods

This case study is located downstream of the Irrawaddy River confluence. Gold mining is taking place downstream of the Irrawaddy River confluence and its tributaries. The study was conducted in six villages surrounding the Myitsone (confluence) near this gold mining activity. There are around 70 to 80 companies / businesspeople operating over 200 small-scale mining sites around Hkang Bu village alone.

A mega hydroelectric power project was planned to be built at the Irrawaddy River confluence during the military dictatorship. It was called the Myitsone Dam project. Local people were forced to relocate for this project. Places became vacant and gold miners began operating. However, the project was later paused by the quasi-military government of U Thein Sein in September 2011. Since then - and until the coup in February 2021 - there were less gold mining activities. Since the coup, the nightmare of the gold rush has returned to the villagers and their natural environment.



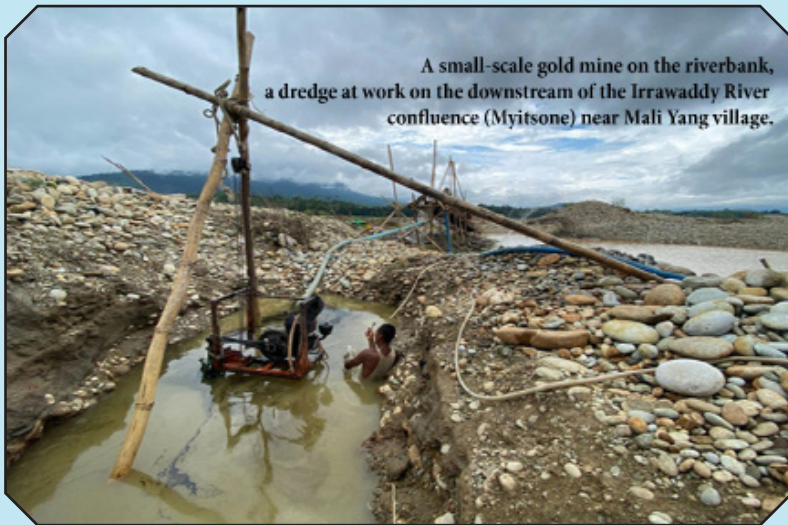
Boats are scattered along the downstream of the confluence (Myitsone) and divers spend their daily life under water searching for gold.

The scale and speed of the extraction of gold have increased using placer mining. This includes panning, suction dredging, and hydraulic mining along the river and its tributaries. Not only does the mining affect places near the river and its tributaries (of Tanghpree village, Aung Min Thar village, and Nawng Hkying village tract), but it also changes the natural flows of the river and its tributaries. The area is filled with people extracting gold as they wish without any oversight. There are also some very large-scale mining activities.

“Yup Zau Hkawng, a local tycoon, has a large-scale mining operation, with permits and hundreds of laborers, along the riverbank in his rub-

ber plantations near Aung Min Thar and Chyinghkrang villages. Jade Land Company is his own company. This tycoon has a close family relationship with the current military's appointed Kachin Chief Minister. The military junta has allowed mining activities in Tanghpre, and the military checkpoint is now open for mining vehicles. Overall, the gold mining activities are still being operated and expanded for high-speed extraction even when Covid19 peaks,” said an Aung Min Thar villager.

A small-scale gold mine on the riverbank, a dredge at work on the downstream of the Irrawaddy River confluence (Myitsone) near Mali



Yang village.

2. Informal Taxation from the Security Forces

The junta's arrangements for taxation in these regions are unknown. Nevertheless, it is observed that local security forces there are demanding direct taxes from the miners. Control of a checkpoint between Tanghpri and Aung Min Thar villages passes between the military, police and the Lawa Yang Militia. Miners in Tanghpri must pay whichever is in control. Miners in Aung Min Thar and Chying Hkrang pay the police force which is stationed between these two places. Miners in the Nawng Hkying village tract (Wai Maw Township) pay the Lasang Awng Wa's Lawa Yang Militia.

“There are conflicts between the security forces in Tanghpri and Aung Min Thar areas. The primary reason for this conflict is to gain more territory so that these security forces can get income from the miners. Often the miners are asked to stop activities until these conflicts are resolved. Later these security forces agreed to divide territories in Tanghpri and Aung Min Thar so they could tax miners separately. This taxation arrangement is dependent on the scale of the mining. It is known that they can get about 50,000 kyats a month for small-scale diving gold mining and 200,000 kyats for a bigger one,” said a farmer from Tanghpri village.

“There are no written receipts or permits. According to Reuters (September 29, 2021), the exchange rate for one US dollar was 1300 Kyats before the coup, but it is now over 2000 kyats since the coup. The

news further states that the currency has lost its value by sixty percent in weeks,” said a woman from Aung Min Thar.

In addition, Myanmar’s ongoing political turmoil and the third wave of Covid-19 cases were severely impacting an economy that had already been weakened by the pandemic in 2020. The economy was expected to contract around 18 percent in Myanmar’s 2021 Fiscal Year (Oct 2020-Sep 2021), with damaging implications for lives, livelihoods, poverty, and future growth, according to World Bank’s Myanmar Economic Monitor. Most miners were migrants from the lower parts of the country and Myitkyina (capital of Kachin State) as they can easily make money by gold mining in Kachin state. Since the mining activities were illegally conducted, the security forces there sometimes asked the miners to stop extraction when the inspection from the state Government came around.

Based on the World Bank Myanmar Economic Monitor July 2022, Myanmar’s economy has faced a series of external and internal disruptions which have impeded recovery from the large contraction in economic activity last year. Economic growth is projected to be 3 percent in the fiscal year ending in September 2022, following an 18% contraction last year, with firm downside risks. The absence of a substantial rebound in growth – with GDP in 2022 estimated to still be around 13 percent lower than in 2019 – means that livelihoods and coping mechanisms will continue to be severely strained. Poverty is estimated

to have doubled compared to March 2020, and with about 40 percent of the population living below the national poverty line in 2022, nearly a decade of progress on poverty reduction has been undone.

The limited growth will continue to test the resilience of the Myanmar people, with household incomes declining and coping mechanisms against food insecurity and poverty increasingly under strain amidst ongoing internal conflict.

3. Lack of Environmental Safety Awareness

“Miners do not seem to have any knowledge or even awareness of the legal obligations of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) or Environmental Management Program (EMP). Yup Zau Hkawng, a local tycoon, would have that legal knowledge as he operates legally, but it seems he doesn't care about those legal environmental obligations. He has changed his extensive lands, which were previously reserved for rubber plantations, into gold mining. The security forces who are stationed there and have oversight of the illegal mining activities do not care about environmental legal obligations but only focus on their revenues from taxation on miners,” an Aung Min Thar villager said.

4. Tailings, Storage Ponds, and Rehabilitation



Suction dredging along the downstream of Irrawaddy River Confluence, the engine and the suction hose are anchored near the riverbank. Alluvial sediment is pumped to the bank for further processing (sluicing, etc.) on land.

Gold mining takes place in the river, beside the river, in streams, and on farmlands. Tailings are often left beside the mining areas. Tailings are not properly managed. Sometimes, these tailings are recycled many times to extract gold. These tailings turn muddy. Moreover, gold mining leaves ponds near the river and streams which are often filled with sand or rocks during the rainy season. Tailings often flow into

these ponds or the ground of the Irrawaddy River and stream at the risk of depleting the river and streams.

Gold mining has left many storage ponds, especially in the Myitsone area. Ponds close to the river are filled with tailings during the rainy season. Similarly, near Hkang Bu village, the course of the tributaries of N-lang Zup and N-Sung Hka and the storage ponds have been destroyed by the gold mining activities downstream of Myitsone (confluence). Gold mining leaves behind many storage ponds and tailings, or just allows tailings to run into streams and Irrawaddy River. There are no rehabilitation activities at all. Downstream of the Irrawaddy confluence, the river is filling up with alluvial sediment, reducing the river depth and putting river transport at risk.

5. Rapid Environmental Impacts

5.1 Local landscape

Local forests near the river and streams have been destroyed by gold mining. In addition, the natural flow of the river and its tributaries have been disturbed by the mining. Riverbanks have gradually



been eroded gradually and the river is filled with alluvium sediment. Farmlands are unable to be uncultivated. Local residential areas are at risk and likely to eventually need relocation.

A Tanghpri villager said that we felt helpless. “Our community lands are mostly affected, and my brother’s orange farmland is already at the edge of nearby mining. Gold miners are rushing everywhere. It is uncontrollable by anyone. We don’t know anymore where to ask for help for these assaults and sufferings. We feel helpless!”

Another villager said that destruction to other surrounding non-mining areas is occurring as well. “50 acres of the surrounding land areas of gold mining are being destroyed and a further 20 acres were lost right after the coup. This could likely rise.”

5.2 Surface soil quality

The area was previously covered with a variety of farms growing produce such as oranges, tea, coffee, bananas, and lychees, abundant due to the rich soil layer. However, this has totally changed. Trees that maintain the natural soil layer along the tributaries and the river are being destroyed. This has led to farmlands being unable to support the very produce that locals depend on for their livelihoods. In other areas, gold particles are washed away leaving the areas with tailings of sand and rocks. This is again leading to uncultivable farmlands.

Wild flora and fauna

Due to the repetitive recycling of the tailings, streams and rivers have become blackened and muddy. This led to the demise of local flora and fauna which depend on the ecosystem of streams and rivers. There used to be a wide variety of fish for locals, but these have disappeared due to the toxic chemicals or migrated to other places. Moreover, there



The destroyed land after gold mining operations on the bank of Myitsone River and the tailings are discarded near the river.

were medicinal plants that were used to by communities, but these are no longer found.

5.3 Pollutions and Climate Change

Gold mining is expanding downstream of the Irrawaddy River confluence leading to an ongoing sedimentation of the rivers and its tributaries. The beauty of the natural landscape there is diminishing. Villages like N-gan, Nawng Hkying, and other villages depend on the river for drinking and household usage. The river has been polluted by mining, so these villages are facing a scarcity of drinking water. There are fewer wells available in these villages. Thus, most villagers are still depending on the river for drinking and household usage, posing greater health risks. The water from the river also has a strong smell of industrial waste.



Increasing gold mining has taken a toll on the downstream of Irrawaddy confluence (Myitson), increasing deforestation and polluting waterways.

A local from Hkang Bu village said: “Hkang Bu village depends on the N-Sung Hka stream for drinking for a long time ago. But now our stream is polluted due to the wastewater from the mining. This mining has operated day and night with heavy machinery like back-hoes.”

Huge mountains, landmasses, and forests are being destroyed. The local climate is changing as it is getting hotter and drier as the natural ecosystem has declined. Transportation with heavy trucks also covers fields, and houses with dust, and reduces air quality.

“Dust from the mining is everywhere in the house. Food, plants, and clothes are always dusty. We need to clean the dust many times a day. We are so worried about the health consequences,” said a woman from N- gan village.

5.4 Noise and Smell

Before mining activities come into sight, the air is filled with smells and smoke from burning fuel and chemicals from the mining. The noise of machines can be heard loudly everywhere. Even inside houses, people need to shout at each other to be heard. Children cannot concentrate on their studies. Community events like church congregations are also disturbed. In addition, there is no proper system for toileting across the mining areas. Human waste, household waste, and the smells from that waste are also present. After a rainy day, it becomes worse. The smells are stronger when the weather is drier.

6. Rapid Social Impacts

6.1 Health

The local health situation is worsening. Local tributaries used to be piped for weirs, irrigation for farmlands, drinking, and household usage. However, this is no longer possible. Most villagers suffer various health problems which are related to using polluted water from the river and tributaries. It takes time for N-gan and Nawng Hkying villagers to get water from the only underground well and this makes many people late for work. For those who cannot wait, there is no option but to continue using the polluted water at the expense of health. Gold mining increases conducting near the riverbank as a result, there are frequent cases of diarrhea, especially in children, but also in miners who do not have access to safe and clean drinking water. Villagers from N-gan village and Nawng Hkying village widely use the river for drinking and household usage like cooking and cleaning.

Locals who rely on gold mining for their livelihoods have even greater health risks. As they cannot invest, some become paid workers or practice traditional methods of mining requiring lower parts of the body continuously immersed in the water under the sun. This causes various skin problems, tuberculosis, and asthma.

6.2 Incidents to people and infrastructure

Beautiful riverbanks were once destinations for locals and tourists to enjoy. The Irrawaddy River confluence and nearby villages are historic and culturally rich places. However, these have changed significantly and are less attractive since the riverbanks and Myitstone confluence are covered with dangerous ponds and tailings. These dangerous ponds and tailings often lead to accidents and create risks for children and animals. There have been numerous animal deaths. Locals are constantly worried about their children and cattle. In addition, the local roads have been damaged or diverted by blockages due to the mines. There are also many mining-related accidents and deaths. Some are related to machinery usage. Others are related to land collapses, heavy lifting with bare hands, and being submerged underwater.

A local recalls an accident that happened to a family: “Last year, a family who came up for mining lost the child and mother. The mother was holding the child while she was watching her husband dive into the water. Her child slipped into the river, and she went to get the child back. However, both drowned, and the man who tried to save them nearly lost his life. What a sad incident.”

The parties responsible for these harms are rarely held accountable and affected people cannot obtain justice or compensation. Locals

fear these kinds of incidents might happen again to them. There is a lack of, or very weak accountability for these problems.

6.3 Forced relocation or labor

With a lack of oversight, the area is full of gold miners looking for even a tiny plot of land to seek small amounts of gold. This creates a chaotic situation as - without consultation with the locals - the miners move about anywhere they please, including over the locals' farmlands or fields. In some cases, the farmers have been forced to sell at a market price. These land grabbing problems are frequent and the security forces who tax the miners do not care about settling any problems.

6.4 Child labor

A woman from Aung Min Thar village said although there has been no forced child labor, children resort to drugs to cope with working in the mines and become. As a result, these children work in gold mining to earn money to buy drugs. In Hkang Bu, there are claims that child labor in mining has been observed. "This child labor is paid unfairly. While the adult is paid 7000 kyats, the child is paid only 4000 per day. Child labor could also be linked to long school closures. Villagers are worried that these children will not go back to school. In some cases, all the family members including the children become paid workers in gold mining due to economic hardship. Children in mining areas

are often tempted with money and moral corruption,” she said.

6.5 Livelihoods

Villagers have previously relied on traditional agriculture or local fishing for their livelihoods. Towards the end of the year, when local fishing was at its peak, this activity provided food and some income for the rest of the year. However, this has now changed. Destructive gold mining activities have led to the extinction of local fish and the loss of farmlands. The economic hardship caused by the pandemic has also put more burden on locals. Thus, gold mining becomes the only option for their livelihood, even though the investment in gold mining is not always profitable due to the rise of inflation and commodity prices.

“The confluence is known as Myitsone in the Burmese language and Mali N’Mai Zup in Kachin. Myitsone is one of the significant cultural heritages and natural resources and biodiversity are abundant. In the past, while I was young there were many fishes we could catch easily. And the Myitsone river can feed my people living along the Irrawaddy River and many people are relying on this river for transportation, fishing, and bamboo rafting but we cannot see much fish because the water is contaminated due to gold mine, and no one can dare to eat fish from the Myitsone river. Most visitors told me that they fear getting poisoned themselves because the gold mines

dump waste and contain heavy metal in the river. As a result of this, we lost our daily income, and we cannot sell our food. The fishing business also does not work anymore because there are not many fish in the river,” said a fisherman from Tanghphe.

Most young people go to China's borders for work. However, due to the pandemic and various immigration restrictions of the Chinese government, they have returned home where there are no employment opportunities except gold mining. Many waves of Covid-19 have dragged villagers into economic hardship. Some local people sell groceries to the gold miners. Others become paid workers, getting between 7000 and 10000 kyats. Some are part-share workers. However, there is no certainty that small-scale miners will make a profit. Some end up in debt after trying small-scale mining, moving from one place to another. Some become drug users and put more burden on their families. Many locals abandoned their traditional agricultural livelihoods as many farmlands were destroyed or affected due to gold mining.

6.6 Inflation

Given the scarcity of safe water, spending on safe drinking water is another household burden for locals. Besides, as in other mining areas, a rise in commodity prices is another burden for villagers. Foods and fuel, which are used in the mining areas, are more expensive than in areas with no mining.

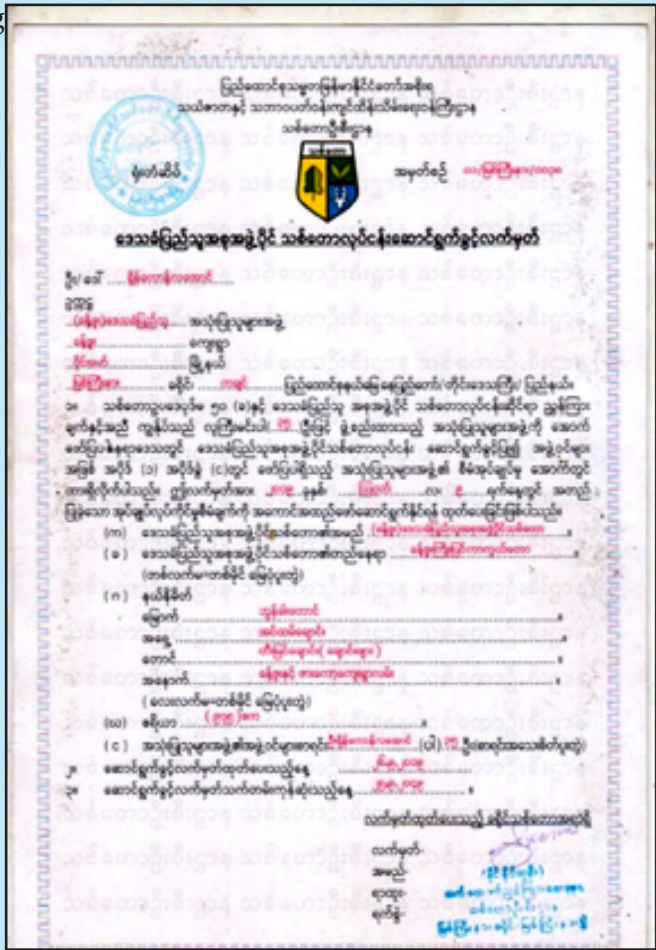
6.7 Informal economy activities

Some drug dealers pretend to do mining as a cover story. However, everyone knows this but keeps quiet about it as these drug dealers have a close connection with security forces. Access to drugs is as easy as grocery buying. Some villagers become drug addicted, and many families are faced with those burdens and the social problems associated with drug addiction.

7. Dynamic Governance

The military, police, and militia forces influence mining as they collect taxes from the miners. These security forces are more focused on generating

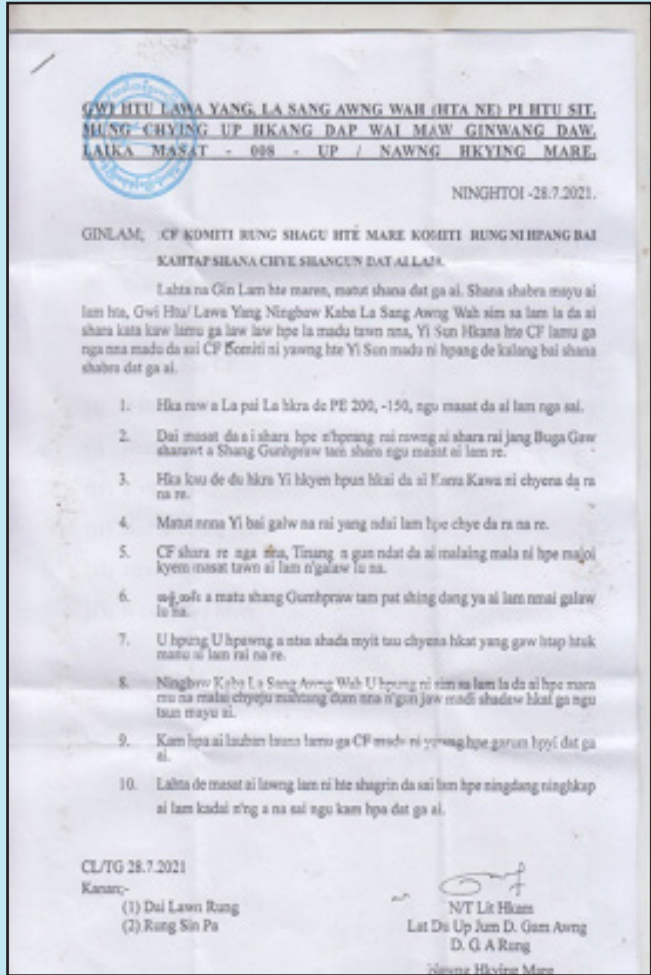
revenue from mining than monitoring legal obligations, and environmental and social impacts. The legitimate local governance such as the village leadership is not consulted by the security forces. The nearby township or district administrations are likely to turn a blind eye as the mili-



tary forces operate on their own. However, the village's leaders have made some efforts to mitigate problems, but with little success.

Community forests are threatened by the Lawa Yang Militia. This was formed by Colonel Lasang Awng Wa's ex-Kachin Independence Organization KIO's National Security Intelligence Chief after a failed coup attempt in early 2005. Lasa Awng Wa and his group converted into the Border Guard Force (BGF), based at Gway Htu village and another at Kawa Yang village in Waimaw Township.

Although a community may possess a docu-



ment like Community forestry Certificate, following the coup, these do not guarantee security. At Hka Bu village area, the community acquired a permit to develop a community forest, on August 9, 2019, which was issued by the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC), Forestry department.

In July 2021, this letter was delivered as a notice letter to the community forest committee members by Lieutenant Gam Awng. This letter mentions that community forest committee members and landowners from villagers must be aware of the following: if there is a gold deposit along the riverbank, even if it is close to villages and between 150-200 feet from the river-bank, villagers must understand this is for a village development project under the title of Communities Development Fund and for Lasang Awng Wa's group financial income. And communities should agree to their gold mining operations in any way without offense.

The villagers are now speechless because they are living under the threat of militia and the community forests are occupied so the militia can search for gold. The community feels that their village is not protected by the rule of law for longer.

8. Limitations to response and mitigation

Groups of village leaders tried to replant trees, but it is not possible in mining areas unless they have a budget for the rehabilitation of land. Environmental awareness among villagers is very low. Since the economic hardship of the pandemic, villagers who rely on gold mining heed the advice of village leaders. Previously, despite the fewer outcomes, like a temporary suspension of mining activities, there were ways to report through media or other ways. However, with the political turmoil since the coup access to the media is significantly limited and these ways are ineffective. There is an increased rate of crime such as drug usage, serious violence, stealing, and many more. Locals live in worry and fear all the time as their properties and security could be compromised. The police force offers no help and is likely to be involved in the drug trade.

In Hkang Bu Village, there were problems between the village and the miners, so the village does not allow any mining within 300 feet of the riverbank to protect the riverbank from erosion. Villagers are constantly facing a vast number of problems. Despite their attempts to address these, their voices have not been heard for a long time. Not only are most harms not being addressed but they are increasing. Villagers feel depressed and have tried to adapt to the situation.

AN UPDATE ON ONGOING GOLD MINING EX- TRACTION ON THE IRRAWADDY MYITSONE CONFLUENCE

June 2022

The continuing gold mining in the Myitsone area is being monitored by Myanmar Mining Watch Network (MMWN), including in Aung Min Thar village, Tanghphe village, Maliyang village, and Nawng Nang village tract through field visit interviews and observation on. MMWN conducted an in-person interview with 8 males and 7 females and a focus group interview with 12 people. MMWN carried out stakeholder mapping and studied human rights abuse, especially on children and women, and environmental and social impact as follow-up activities. MMWN has been monitoring gold mining operations at the Irrawaddy Myitsone confluence since 2021 - they have been increasing. MMWN provides this brief update based on research conducted before and after the coup. Local tycoons, militia, military regimes, and armed groups are all profiting from the mining. The military regime, and militia have levied taxes monthly on small-scale and large-scale companies. Gold miners are operating with heavy machinery both downstream and upstream of Myitsone. Some local people also carry out small-scale gold mining, but it does not severely impact the environment because they just use hand tools.

A Maliyang resident said, “many local people are mining for gold

around Myitsone, Tanghpri, Maliyang, and Dawngpan. Because there are no proper jobs after the coup most villagers rely on gold mines. We can make money, between 20000-50000 Kyats per day, when we go to the gold mines. The gold price has increased, so everyone is happy to mine for gold. And we do not need to go far away from the village so that it is accessible for men and women. Young people are also working in the gold mines area, and they usually follow up with their parents and help them. Young people assist their parents if they can carry water pipes and hoses, and the parents also let them do it. Parents are willing to send their children to school, but they do not want their children to attend under the State Administration Council (SAC). Gold mining is supportive to temporarily settle the financial difficulties of the family”.

“If the families cannot afford to buy equipment and generator power, they use a pan and shovel. But now local elites are taking advantage of the political instability in Kachin state. Yup Zau Hkawng is one of the people who is a local elite businessman, a member of

Taken Photo near the riverbank of Myintsone during the occasion of World Environment Day June 5, 2022, at Hkang Bu Village, Waingmaw township



Taken photo near the riverbank of Myintsone during the occasion of World Environment Day June 5, 2022, at Hkang Bu village, Waingmaw township.

the Kachin Peace-talk Creation Group., and he runs Jadeland Company Ltd., which is operating gold mines in the Myitsone area. Local people are financially not strong enough to run large scale with heavy machines, though Yup Zau Hkawng can afford to operate large-scale gold mines. He is close to Kachin State's military junta-appointed chief minister as well. Therefore, he has the privilege to manage as he likes and does not care about anyone. He threatens local people if anyone opposes his gold mining activity. We feel that no one stands by our side since the coup happened in Myanmar and even the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) does not show any sympathy for local people's voices even though we had submitted an appeal letter to stop the gold mine in Myitsone. Local civil society organizations and environmental activists are also less active in this case because I think they have also struggled to survive under the military regime. We had a good collaboration in the protection of the Irrawaddy River in the past but there are not many activities regarding environmental protection after the coup. We are very angry when heavy machinery comes in and exploits our territory so, we feel disadvantaged from gold mines since we just use a shovel, generator power, and suction pipe hose, a tray, and sluice. We encounter deforestation and a scarcity of natural resources. Locals mainly use wood for cooking rice and there are no more trees to collect in the forest. Yup Zau Hkawng, who occupied the beauty of Myitsone to operate a gold mine and destroyed the Myitsone landscape,” said a woman leader from Aung Min Thar.

LOCAL PEOPLE’S CONCERNS ABOUT DEFORESTATION AND LIVELIHOODS

“The forests are disappearing because of increasing gold mines in the surrounding Myitsone areas by using heavy machine-like backhoes that clear the trees very quickly and destroy the land in a short number of hours searching for gold. You can see clearly if you visit Myitsone, where the landscape is no longer stunning, and the waterway is destroyed and polluted. There has been flooding to the local farms during the rainy season and large amounts of sediment are left and covered on the farmland. As a result of this, crops do not grow properly, so some farmers sold their land to others even though they don’t want to sell,” a Maliyang farmer said.

“Before there was no gold mining operation company in Nawng Nang village but now there are several big companies operating gold mines downstream of Myitsone River. There are also many gold mining activities and people working in small boats and using hydraulic engines to suck enormous amounts of soil, sand, and rock to find gold. There are four companies - Sein Lone company, Hugawng company, Myitsuthar company, and Myanmar Maker Home company. They were granted permits to extract sand from the downstream of the Myitsone river, but they are actively getting involved in gold mining operations after the coup as well. Villagers are facing many problems

and difficulties such as air pollution, noise, accidents, and riverbank erosion since those companies have entered the Nawng Nang village tract,” said a villager from Nawng Nang.

The companies occupied the riverbank areas without consent from villagers and dug sand and gold. The village headman sold those lands to the companies without consultation and agreement with the local people. Only some local people know the real situation, but they are afraid to express the truth, so most villagers remain unaware. Most villagers believed that the land was seized by the government, but in fact, the headman of the village and local authorities sold it to companies. Those lands are owned by local people (under a mixture of communal and individual tenure), but they are living in fear because the political situation is unstable, so there is no rule of law and law enforcement in the Nawng Nang. Villagers are not able to search for gold at the Irrawaddy River because the companies restrict those areas and do not allow them to search for gold. Therefore, it causes financial difficulty for communities since they rely on nature, they have no land for farming and the river is polluted due to gold mines.

“There is no place for fishing in the river because gold mining industries discharge mining waste so there are high mercury concentrations in the water. Local people could provide enough financial support for families by operating on communal land in the past. They could search for gold by using their hands with shovels and pans. The

villagers were able to make money by searching for gold near the riverbank. But all these things were suddenly gone and changed after the company came to the village. The riverbanks also occasionally collapse, so the villagers relocate further from the riverbank. The company bought land near the riverbank to extract sand, but they are also carrying out gold mining in collaboration with local authorities, the military regime and militia. Due to the increase of gold mines near the riverbank, when the rainy season falls, there has been water diversion into the farmland. The water from the river flowed onto the farm and destroyed plants. The company area is the original village of Rosner, a Nawng Nang villager said.”

“We are currently facing a problem, and that is the company's sand, and rock extraction from downstream of Irrawaddy River. When cars pass through the village, it becomes so dusty that we cannot stay at home. Villagers did not like those company cars passing through the village. The companies work between 6:00 am to 9:00 pm. It was very noisy and disturbed our daily activities. We could not rest and sleep properly at night and during the day. This sound distracted us not only when we were praying at church but also when the children were studying at school. Therefore, most young people lost focus while they were studying at school and doing homework at night. Some local people moved to another place because their land plots are close to the company site, so they do not want to build houses for living long term and they change the land into farms. However, even if they tried

to plant the vegetables on their farm, the plant cannot grow properly as a result of truck car vibration and dust. There were so many earth tremors and dust occurrences on the road from passing cars. Due to the dust covering the plants, they cannot grow properly. The soil has been ruined by the development of gold mines around the riverbank. It was very difficult to cultivate on the farms. The villagers usually get affected by air pollution and this causes them health problems such as respiration problems, and lung disease,” said a villager from Nawng Nang village.

ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS VIOLATIONS and CHALLENGES AGAINST WOMEN

Before we were able to collect logs easily from the river but now, we cannot access them anymore. Gold mining operations are being conducted upstream and downstream along the river of Irrawaddy confluence. The consequences of this are that the forest is destroyed and disappears day by day so that the wood does not flow into the river. It is a burden for a housewife who can find wood from far away. We sometimes must buy logs for cooking. Some women sometimes have to go to the forest to find logs due to the lack of wood near the village. Women must cut and collect wood in one place and bring them back home. It is difficult to carry a bunch of wood by motorbike for women because the wood is heavy with a lot of weight. Some families cannot stay together because the husband goes to do business in another place, especially in mining areas. Women are key in taking responsibility for household management in a family. Now, most villagers become workers and they are dealing with their daily basis as day laborers to get daily wages.

“My wife was sick and not feeling well and it was very difficult for her to do housework and care for children during those times. I was not at home as well and I stayed in gold mining areas and there was no accessible telecommunication. My wife was struggling with these problems and challenges, and she just prayed to God and passed

those times comforting herself to relieve her mind and to have calm. We are a Christian family, so we usually give our burden to God when we cannot solve the problem and just pray. We believe that God will carry all burdens on our behalf,” a gold miner from Nawng Nang village.

A woman from Nawng Nang village said, “there were also some women in my village, who left home to find a job and never came back home even though they have children. Because they found a partner and established a new family there. The main cause is that the husband cannot support financially enough for the family and lacks responsibility over the family. Likewise, some men also never came back home and dedicated their time in the mining area and building a new life with their loved one. Because of this, it impacted the net of families, especially children’s education and health are more affected. Some women experienced mental illness because of the pressure of the family and finances.”

“Gold mining business is hard and relies on destiny because we cannot see and predict where the gold deposit is. I encountered difficulties when my income was not stable so I could not send money to my family. This kind of gold miner work is not a certain job. Sometimes, I felt depressed and feeling low. I was filled with many thoughts like my family, what they were eating and how they were struggling in their daily life or do they have enough money to buy rice from the

market. Sometimes, gold miners did not gain their daily wages fully due to the employer who just gave installments for payment. If the employer paid full wages, it would be helpful and enough to support my family. Because of that, my family was facing difficulties in making a living,” said a gold miner from Nawng Nang village.

Relying on gold mining, families were facing social problems, for example, most wives were disappointed with their husbands because they could not provide enough money. Living in mining areas most miners are addicted to drugs and care less about family. Thus, most women carried a load of burdens on their families. Even if the wife wanted to discuss family affairs by finding a solution together, drug-addicted husbands were not interested in this. Most men did not want to know and hear about family difficulties. Because drug users knew that they could not support enough families, ignored problems, and this way made them comfortable mentally. Therefore, I think that if a gold mining operation is ongoing in the Irrawaddy river area, those problems will affect women in some way.

A gold miner from Maliyang said, “he even faced challenges and problems and he had no way to express his words. He needed to support his family and look after them, especially for my children’s education, health, food, and nutrition. Most villagers did not gain profit from gold extraction and were left with natural disasters and loss of land and livelihood. There are differences between the mining family

and the no-mining family. Mining families could not often stay together with family so the children did not have enough parental nurturing and warmth, and the children went astray, and behavior changes occurred. Some young people were addicted to drugs and dropped out of school and worked in the mining areas. It led to many young people living under the trap of drug addiction.”

“In the past, I had not used drugs, but I started using the drug for fun and relieved pain after finishing work at mining areas. Since then, I was the one who became a drug-addicted person. Later, I could not support my family and I did not speak properly with my wife and always viewed negatively what she said. And my mind was dysfunctional, and the conversation was leading to quarrels and fighting. I was not able to be a good example for my family, particularly for my children because of drug use. Now, I could not live together with my family, and I spent most of my time in the mining area and passed my daily hardship by working as a gold miner. In the mining area, there was no good thing here in a mining area, and there are many bars, drug dealing, and sex workers,” said a miner from Nawng Nang village.

22 years old woman, a mother of two children who worked as a domestic worker was raped and killed in a gold mining area.

“A very young woman was raped and killed by a gold miner at Cho Lin (b) U Zaw Ja's gold block in Phong Ye Chaung Shwe Hmaw, Wai Maw Township, Kachin State, on the morning of July 4, 2022. The woman, identified as Daw Tan Baung Khaung Nang, was a 21-year-old mother of two children who worked as a cook. The identity of the man who raped and killed her is unknown. This area is under the control of U La Sang Aung Wa, the leader of the Gwe Htu militia. Her body was found naked in the evening under the Phong Ye Chaung bridge after two days. No action was taken by the local authority and there was no fair compensation for the victim's family either,” said a woman leader from Maliyang village.

Conclusion

In this political and pandemic crisis, natural resources are increasingly extracted, often illegally, with significant harm to the environment and social wellbeing. In the case study, the military junta's security forces and its allied militias are the primary actors who allow the mining and collect taxation. Taxation should be managed only by the legitimate authorities - namely a democratic government (through the Internal Revenue Department and the Union or State/Divisions Government issuing the mining permits) and Ethnic Resistance Organizations. These authorities must be accountable to communities.

However, currently, in case study, the opposite is taking place. The junta is operating like an armed gang, seizing revenues but taking no action or responsibility for ensuring accountability, conserving the environment, or protecting cultural heritage. This clearly shows that the military junta does not ensure the rule of law despite announcing itself as a caretaker in this interim period. It is still unknown how the revenues collected from this mining is being used, and the degree to which mining businesses have ties with the military.

Without effective law and regulations illegal business and corruption will grow, land confiscations will continue, the number of migrant workers will increase in the area, which will lead to increasing conflicts among different political and economical interest groups, as

well as between local and migrant people and further exploitation of vulnerable groups, women and children.

Without appropriate adaptation and mitigation, the damage, the impacts will soon be irreversible. If the mining continues at the current rate and manner, local communities in Kachin State is at a severe and fastly increasing risk of losing their livelihoods, health, forest and water resources, Kachin cultural and historical heritage will disappear in the near future.

The State Administration Council (SAC) should stop granting permits regarding gold mines in Kachin. The ethnic armed organizations also should ban mining operations of gold in Kachin for the sake of communities and environment and are supposed to adopt the policy and legal frameworks related to natural resources and environment. Religious based organizations, Ethnic literature and culture groups from Kachin state, and environmental concern groups should speak out against gold mining and act collectively to stop mining activities.

Recommendations

To Policymakers who hold the power:

- Preserve the significant places of cultural sites that are integral to Kachin Indigenous identity and history and the lifeblood river for millions of Myanmar people living along the riverbanks.
- Suspend the gold mining activity which could cause large environmental and social damage in Kachin state.
- Abolish the 2018 Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VFN) Land Management Law in favor of ethnic communities.
- Ensure the existing mining companies follow Environmental Conservation law and rules and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure.
- Facilitate a legal abiding Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of damages to the environment, health, livelihood, and education of the local people, especially vulnerable groups such as women and children.

- Protect the people and groups who speak out for preservation of culture and environment of local communities in Kachin.
- Together, religious-based organizations, ethnics literature and cultural groups in Kachin State, and environmental groups jointly protest the mining of gold.

To the Civil Society in Myanmar and Mekong regions, we ask you to

- Act as the watchdog and raise awareness of ongoing damage to the environment, livelihood, health, and culture of Kachin communities.
- Advocate for the abolishment of the 2018 Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VFN) Land Management Law.
- Empower locals to stand up and work collectively on measures and practices of adaptation and mitigation

To the International Community, we ask you to

- Support Civil Society and Locals community in Kachin
- Advocate to the Policymakers
- Provide relevant technical support

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