



December 13, 2013

Villagers in eastern Shan State suffer forced labour and extortion by Burma Army troops guarding loggers in Salween dam flood zone

An update by the Shan Human Rights Foundation

Summary

Villagers in Murng Paeng township are being used as forced labour by Burmese government troops giving security to military-linked logging operations above the planned Ta Sang dam on the Salween River. The loggers are clearing out teak forests from the projected flood zone for export to neighbouring countries.

Four Burmese battalions have been forcing villagers from nine villages in Murng Pu Long tract to work as military porters and guides, and to build and repair army camps and roads. The troops have also extorted food and money from villagers, and commandeered their vehicles.

These abuses are causing ongoing displacement into Thailand, where refugees from Shan State continue not to be recognized, and are forced to survive as migrant workers.

Background of Murng Pu Long and Ta Sang dam

Murng Pu Long is a remote, mountainous area in the south of Murng Paeng township. During 1996-1998, 24 villages in Murng Pu Long tract were forcibly relocated as part of a large government anti-insurgency operation in southern Shan State that uprooted over 300,000 people. Since then villagers have returned to only about half of the villages, as the area remains contested between the Burma Army and the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S). In June 2011, two villages were again forcibly relocated after fighting. The SSA-South signed a ceasefire in December 2011, but there are still sporadic clashes in the area. In November 2013, there was an armed clash between SSA-S and the Burma Army near Ta Sop Bu on the Salween river.

Murng Pu Long lies north of the planned Ta Sang dam on the Salween river, and many of the remaining villages in the tract will be flooded if the dam is built (see map of projected flood zone).. The dam, now officially called the “Mai Tong” dam, is one of six dams that the Burmese government is planning on the Salween River; and at 228 meters, will be the tallest in Southeast Asia, producing 7,000 megawatts, most of which is planned for export to Thailand. The main investors are the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) International Co. Ltd. and China Three Gorges Corporation. A ground breaking ceremony for the dam took place in 2007, but actual construction has not yet begun. None of the villagers in the Murng Pu Long area have been informed or consulted about the dam plans.

The teak forests in Murng Pu Long are some of the last remaining natural sources of teak in Burma, kept intact by the remoteness of the area and ongoing conflict. However, the December 2011 ceasefire has been a pretext for loggers to access the area, with Burmese military security, and begin large scale operations to clear out the teak forests from the projected flood zone of the Ta Sang dam.



Map of projected Ta Sang flood zone from 2006 report “Warning Signs” by the Shan Sapawa Environmental Organisation; the black rectangle shows the Murng Pu Long area

Current logging operations in Murng Pu Long

There are two main groups carrying out logging in Murng Pu Long, over an area of approximately 50,000 acres. These groups are known by the names of the men who run the operations. The two groups are as follows:

1. Sai Naw Kham's group

This group is based in Keng Tawng township, west of the Salween River, opposite Murng Pu Long. It is headed by a Shan called Sai Naw Kham, who has close ties with the Burmese military. There are about 70 people in the group carrying out logging, mostly Karen and Shan from outside the area. They are using about 20 chain saw machines, two bulldozers, two cranes and ten elephants to drag the logs, and 40 ten-wheel trucks to transport the logs, which are sent to Keng Tung. From Keng Tung, the logs are sent to the border for export but it is not known which route is taken.

2. U Tin Myint's group

This group is based in Murng Ton, south of Murng Pu Long. It is headed by U Tin Myint, a former Burmese military officer. There are around 50 people carrying out logging in this group. Most of them are former Burma Army soldiers. They have about 15 chain saw machines, as well as a bulldozer, a crane and over 30 ten-wheel trucks for transporting the logs. This group transports logs to Murng Hsat and on to Tachileik, from where they are exported to neighbouring countries.



Teak logs stored at Tachileik, December 2013

Increased deployment of Burmese government troops after start of logging operations

In 2011, there was only one Burmese battalion, LIB 360, from Murng Paeng, stationed in Murng Pu Long. However in 2012, after the start of logging operations, another Burmese battalion, LIB 528 came to operate in the area, and in 2013, two more battalions, LIB 333, from Murng Hsat, and LIB 519 from Murng Ton also came to operate. They stay at two main bases: one on the Salween River at Ta Long, and one at Wan Tong village, and provide security for the logging operations, rotating every three months. In total there are about 200 troops in the area.

Human rights violations by Burma Army troops

There are nine main villages in Murng Pu Long tract, with a total of about 300 households, or about 1,500 people: Wan Tong, Wieng Hawng, Wieng Sarn, Zorm Tawng, Ping Sang, Wan Kun Kawk, Keng Hin, Nar Lae and Lorn Kew. They have suffered the following abuses by Burma Army troops stationed in their area:

a. Forced portering

Since early 2012 up to the present, Burmese soldiers have been forcing civilians from the nine villages to carry their materials and food when they patrol between their camps, and in the logging areas where they are providing security. Around 20-30 villagers at a time have to take turns to carry their materials and food with them for 6-7 days. Villagers receive no pay, and have to bring their own food with them when they are portering.

b. Forced to build and repair Burma Army bases

Villagers have been forced to build and repair military barracks, both in the main camp in Wan Tong as well as in temporary camps, every month on a rotational basis. In one week, 30-35 people were forced to work for the Burmese soldiers. They were divided into several groups, with some forced to cut wood and build fences for their base and others forced to build and repair their barracks. The villagers were forced to go from 7:00 am until 5 or 6:00 pm, and if tasks were not done, the responsibility would go to the next group of villagers. Villagers had to bring their own food during work.

c. Forced to build logging roads

Between December 2012 to June 2013, villagers were forced by Burmese soldiers to clear and repair roads for logging (see map below). The work was supervised by the Burmese soldiers. Villagers had to bring their own food and if their food was finished, they had to eat banana blossom soup. Villagers were separated into groups of 30-40 people, and had to go for ten days at a time.

d. Forced to provide motorcycles for military use

In May and June of 2013, Burmese troops stationed at Wan Tong ordered the Wan Tong villagers to provide them with five motorbikes for their use. The vehicles were kept at their base for use by the soldiers. The motorbike owners had to provide petrol costs to the soldiers: 3,000 kyats (US\$3) per motorbike. The motorbikes were used for three days before being returned to the owner. In June 2013, one of the motorbikes was damaged by the soldiers. When the owner went to collect his motorbike, he was blamed for providing the soldiers with a damaged motorbike.

e. Extortion of villagers' chicken and pork

The Burmese soldiers have been ordering villagers to provide them with chicken and pork, sometimes paying about half the market price of the meat, and sometimes not paying anything at all.

In one month, three villages have to take turns to provide 5 kgs of chicken each. The local market price of chicken in the village is 4,500 kyat (US\$4.50) per 1.4 kg, but only about half is paid, if at all. Those villagers who do not own chickens have to collect money among themselves to buy chicken for the Burmese soldiers.

The soldiers also force villagers to sell them pork at a cheap price. The market price of pork is 5,000 kyat (approx. US\$5) per 1.4 kg. However, the Burmese soldiers paid only 2,500 kyat (US\$2.50) per 1.4 kg. Sometimes, if the villagers didn't want to sell the pork to them the soldiers would just take it anyway, up to 7-8 kg. of pork each time.

f. Extortion of rice

Since early 2012, the Burmese soldiers in Murng Pu Long, who had been forcing villagers to provide them with paddy, began forcing them to provide milled rice instead. Each wet-rice farmer has to provide the Burmese troops with one large tin (approx 15 kgs) of milled rice per month. The rice has to be taken by the farmers to the Burmese army base at Wan Tong. Then half of the rice is sent to the Burmese military at the town of Murng Paeng .

g. Arbitrary taxation

The Burmese troops arbitrarily collect taxes from villages, sometimes two or three times a month. Each time, they ask for at least 100,000 kyat (US\$100) per village, whatever the size of the village.

Interview with a refugee from Murng Pu Long (male, aged 40)

Date of interview: September 18, 2013

Location of interview: Fang district, Chiang Mai province, Northern Thailand

Current occupation in Thailand: agricultural wage laborer

I came with my family to Thailand this year because of the forced portering. We were forced by Burmese soldiers to guide them, and carry their food and other things. We had to go where they wanted. If the Burmese soldiers got the news about Shan soldiers, they called the villagers to guide them to where the Shan soldiers were. Last year a former elephant owner was accused of being a Shan soldier. He was beaten so badly that his head was bleeding. He could not be cured. He was given medical treatment for one month and finally he died.

Once the Burmese soldiers came to our village, and threatened us, asking about the Shan soldiers. They asked: "Are you supporting the Shan soldiers?" The villagers said: "We support you." Then the Burmese soldiers said: "If you support us, why not help us?"

These Burmese soldiers were from Murng Paeng. In Murng Pu Long, there are Burmese soldiers from Murng Hsat, Murng Ton, Murng Paeng and Keng Tung. They rotate. When they stay in Murng Pu Long, they ask the villagers for chicken and pork. They give only half of the market price to the owners. In addition, in order to avoid being porters, a family must give chicken and pork to the head villager.

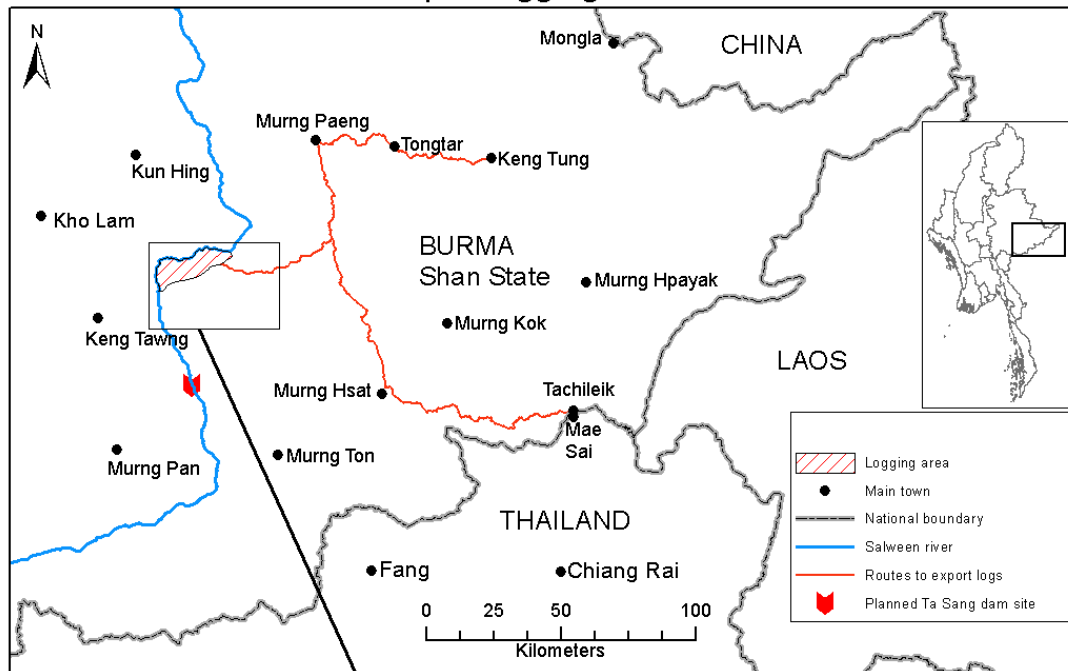
Last year one of the porters nearly stepped on a landmine. Fortunately, he saw it first. The landmine was covered with dry leaves. Porters cannot go back home without the Burmese soldiers' permission. Due to being forced to be porters all the time, villagers are unable to do their livelihood.

When I was a porter, sometimes we had to go for 10 days. We had to bring our own food. We could not do our own work. The loads were so heavy that it was difficult to walk. Villagers had to go and build the soldiers' barracks and porter for at least 2-5 days. We had to bring our own tools with us.

In February 2013, I was forced with a group of about 9 villagers to guide the way for 40 Burmese soldiers. All of us had to bring muskets with us. Two of the villagers almost stepped on a land mine. After that, the villagers did not dare to go with them, but when they refused to go with them, they accused the villages of being on the side of the Shan army.

The teak logging is taking place along the Salween river. The villagers get no benefit from the logging.

Map of logging routes



Detailed map of logging area

