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International Karen Organisation

Asia Pacific Region

European Region

US/Canada Region

**An open letter to KNU Chairperson General Mutu Sae Poe:
Attending Asian Highway Opening Ceremony Legitimizes
Government's Use of Force, Land Confiscation and Displacement**

29 August 2015

Dear General Mutu Sae Poe,

The International Karen Organization (IKO) is deeply troubled to learn that you were invited as a special guest of the quasi-civilian government of Thein Sein to the opening ceremony of the Asian Highway 1 (AH1) from Myawaddy to Kawkaik on 30 August. The opening ceremony is only made possible by the Thein Sein government's massive military offensive against the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) last month that displaced more than 1,000 civilians during a time of supposed peacebuilding. By supporting this project, you are playing right into the hands of the government's classic divide and conquer tactics, sabotaging the unity of Karen armed groups, and wrecking the Karen people's aspiration for peace and self-determination.

We urge you to take a firm stand against the Thein Sein government's ongoing campaign to control Karen lands, territory, and natural resources through militarized development. Following and sticking to your commitment "to pursue a political fight without spilling a single drop of blood," you must boycott the opening ceremony of this blood-highway.

Construction of the Asian Highway in Karen State has long been accompanied by human rights violations, land confiscation, unchecked natural resource extraction, forced labor, militarization, and violence. Delayed because of armed conflict, the project was revived in a secret deal after the 2012 preliminary bilateral ceasefire agreement by a small group of the KNU leaders and the Thein Sein government. The new section from Myawaddy to Kawkaik was completed non-transparently with funding from the Thai government, while the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) support the whole AH1. This project follows the same pattern seen again and again in Burma, where temporary ceasefire agreements are used to extend the military led Thein Sein government control over ethnic nationalities territories through development projects and militarization.

The billions of dollars of trade revenues that will be brought by the Asian Highway will only enrich companies in Thailand while reinforcing military rule in Burma. Without guarantees for benefit sharing, the project will leave the Karen people hopelessly caught in the middle with nothing. Road projects have the potential to bring benefits for rural communities in Karen State, but only if implemented in a democratic and transparent manner, and after a full peace agreement is reached, control and benefit sharing guaranteed through political dialogue, and a decentralized federal union achieved. If you support the Asian Highway project in its current form, you are ignoring the will and wellbeing of the Karen people.

Recommendations to the KNU Chairperson and leadership

1. Boycott the government's upcoming Asian Highway opening ceremony.
2. Take a firm stand against the government's campaign to control Karen territory through militarized development.
3. In the current peace process, secure guarantees for the control, good governance, and benefit sharing of the Asian Highway through political dialogue.
4. In the current peace process, secure recognition of local people's right to control and manage their own land and natural resources, including recognition of KNU land titles by the government.
5. Publicly disclose all information related to the highway project, including construction contracts, financial payments, an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA).
6. Engage in meaningful discussions with Karen civil society and other Karen armed groups to design a governance plan for the Asian Highway based on the priorities of local people, and to conduct a Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) of AH1 and related road construction in Karen State.
7. Prioritize achieving genuine peace and a democratic federal union before large-scale development.
8. Truly represent the political objectives of all Karen people

Sincerely,

Central Executive Committee
International Karen Organisation (IKO)

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