



Caught Between the
Coup and Climate Change :
Indigenous Communities in Burma Continue
Their Struggle for Justice Amid
Unprecedented Pressures



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Introduction/Summary

Myanmar is a culturally and ecologically rich and diverse country, home to a vast array of biologically diverse ecosystems, from high altitude alpine forests and snowcapped mountains in northernmost Kachin State, to low elevation rainforests, mangroves and marine ecosystems in southern Tanintharyi Region. Myanmar's wealth of natural resources and biodiversity are located almost exclusively in the territories of diverse Indigenous peoples, who have followed their own customary practices, institutions, and modes of collective action through which they have protected and sustained these landscapes. Relationships between local communities and their surrounding biodiversity remain strong to this day, and as a result Myanmar's Indigenous peoples reside in some of the richest remaining biodiversity in South East Asia, however growing challenges to both indigenous communities and their territories now threatens this.

On February 2021, during the height of the COVID pandemic, the Myanmar Military staged a coup d'état, reversing the results of the 2020 general election, and detaining political leaders and activists across the country. Resultantly, huge protests broke out in cities, towns and villages throughout Myanmar, which were brutally suppressed by the military, causing a widespread non-violent resistance movement to give way to an armed revolution across the country. People from cities and towns mobilized into local defense forces that trained and sought shelter in the territories of Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), resulting in a (re)ignition of military attacks, and bringing new waves of armed conflict, human rights abuses and crimes against humanity to the lands and forests of indigenous peoples, sites that have already seen decades of civil war.¹



1. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/31/myanmar-coup-leads-crimes-against-humanity>

To date over one million people have been displaced by the growing civil war, at least 50% of these are within indigenous and ethnic territories.² These regions have also become increasingly militarized, with road blocks and check points erected by the Myanmar military, restricting movement of local communities, and escalating violence creating an environment of fear. Escalating civil war has also given way to a conflict economy, in which natural resources are rapidly extracted, unfettered and unrestricted by rules, regulations and resistance. The results on Myanmar's Indigenous peoples have been catastrophic, and they are now in a struggle for the survival of their lives, forests and territories.

The briefing paper is based on a research project conducted by All Burma Indigenous Peoples Alliance (ABIPA), a network of over 40 Indigenous peoples' organizations. While members of the alliance wanted to conduct research across the entire country, the fast-deteriorating security situation in many areas meant that research sites were limited. As a result, research was conducted across 22 villages, 7 townships, across 4 States and Regions, and included interviews and focus group discussions with 233 individuals (131F/ 102M) conducted by local research teams organized by members of the alliance.

ABIPA set about conducting this research after seeing the environmental devastation that resource extraction operations taking place across their territories after the coup has caused. Alliance members wanted to examine expanding resource extraction, and the resultant impacts of this on the lives, livelihoods and territories of Indigenous peoples. While the context in each area is different, the unfolding situation with respect to resource extraction is similar across all regions. New business ventures are almost entirely being conducted illegally, without formal permissions. While in the past illegal mining was an illicit activity that was carried out covertly, businessmen are now conducting their activities overtly with no threat of retribution, this shows the extent to which the rule of law has deteriorated in Myanmar. Rather than gaining official permissions, businessmen conduct their operations instead with the approval of nearby SAC troops, acting as a source of revenue for military battalions to continue to oppress the people.

2. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/3248>

Recommendations:

Thorough analysis of the results of research conducted across Putao and Myitkyina in northern Kachin State, Tachileik in eastern Shan State, Thantaunggyi in Karen State and Tanintharyi Township in Tanintharyi Region have resulted in the following recommendations:

1. Research sites were located in the territories of Indigenous minorities, whose lives are interdependent with surrounding water, land and forests, which provides the bed rock for their food, cultural and livelihood security. Growing unrestrained and unregulated natural resource extraction in the context of growing instability and authoritarianism threatens to upturn this bedrock, destroying the foundation of the lives of millions of land and forest dependent persons across the country. This research recommends that all stakeholders take immediate and urgent actions to halt further environmental destruction.
2. This study has uncovered the extent to which local authorities and businessmen are taking advantage of collapsing rule of law in order to grab and extract natural resources. The coup makers hold primary responsibility for this rapid and irreversible assault on Myanmar's lands, forests and biodiversity, and must be held accountable through future transitional justice processes. In this regard, we recommend environmental defenders, civil society organizations and international non-governmental organizations systematically document all environmental crime and destruction carried out during this period.
3. The way of life of local indigenous peoples has enabled them to protect and sustain forests and biodiversity within their territories. This is their inherent right. In line with the proverb "if one person cannot do it alone, a thousand people can do it collectively", we recommend that communities and peoples organizations continue activities for the preservation and protection of their surrounding environment such as strengthening customary practices, monitoring forests, and enforcing local rules and regulations. These efforts should be supported by civil society and international organisations.

4. Where businessmen and authorities engage in the theft and plunder of locally managed resources, they often divide communities and incentivize local people to participate in the destruction and sale of their homelands. Due to growing poverty as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the coup, some local community members abandon their lands to work in gold mines, selling resources to large companies in the area. In order to sustain and protect the environment, businessmen entering indigenous territories to extract their natural resources must be decisively rejected. We call on local communities, civil society, international organisations and governments to prevent companies from exploiting this period of instability.

5. This research has revealed how the Myanmar military is fueling both brutal attacks against civilians and plundering its forests, rivers and biodiversity. We call on governments, the UN, international organisations and networks to act. Only when Myanmar has been freed from the junta, will the protection of natural resources be possible.

Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar

Research that this briefing is based on was conducted among Indigenous communities throughout Myanmar. Research sites include five villages in Putao and three villages in Myitkyina, in Kachin State, five villages in Tachileik, Eastern Shan State, two villages in Tanintharyi Township, in Tanintharyi Region, and seven villages in Thandaunggyi, in Karen State.

Indigenous communities across each of these regions maintain close relationships with their territories, forests and biodiversity. Indeed, indigenous territories in Myanmar, including the communities featured in this research, reside over landscapes that harbor some of the richest and most diverse forests and biodiversity in South East Asia. Communities depend on these surrounding forests for forest foods, subsistence farming, animal grazing, herbal medicines, subsistence construction materials and ritual practices, while at the same time instituting local forms of forest management based on local knowledge and customs. These management systems have shown to be highly effective in sustaining locally and globally critical ecosystems, and are now internationally recognized as Indigenous Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs)³.

While the relationships between Indigenous communities and their forests have endured for generations, the military coup on February 1st 2021 has resulted in unprecedented challenges for communities across the country. Escalating conflict, unravelling rule of law, and collapsing livelihoods have led to a fast-growing level of unfettered and unregulated resource extraction, resulting in the pollution of agricultural lands, streams and rivers upon which communities depend for their livelihoods, and the destruction of the forests that communities have protected for generations.

3. For more information on ICCAs internationally, please visit: <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/>. For more information on ICCAs in Myanmar, reports can be found at the following link: <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/index.php/category/world-en/asia-en/myanmar-en/>

The Worsening Socio-Economic Condition of Myanmar's Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous communities have long been marginalized by successive ethno-majoritarian civilian governments and military regimes in Myanmar. Predominantly residing in upland areas, Indigenous communities have little access to state services, have been targeted by policies that have sought deny local cultures and languages in order to assimilate local populations into the center, and have suffered from the impacts of decades of civil war. Despite these hardships, Myanmar's Indigenous peoples have managed to live relatively autonomously from the state, depending on local forest-based and agrarian livelihoods and customary institutions for everyday governance. Caught in the crosshairs of climate change and the coup, however, Indigenous communities are incurring increasing difficulties with their livelihoods.

Declining Access to Essential Services

Research found that 31% of households in this study have no access to health care, while 59% have access to a health worker, and a further 30% have access to a clinic. The majority of health care is provided either by non-governmental organizations or by ethnic administrations, rather than by the central Myanmar government. Following the coup, however, there are increasing difficulties for health workers travelling to villages, as a result of escalating conflict and the erection military road blocks and checkpoints.

While 87% of researched households have access to basic education schools, 47% of these have closed since the COVID pandemic and the military coup. Even in the schools that remain open, there is a very low level of attendance as parents refuse to give children 'slave education' under military rule. Education provided by the central government is taught in Burmese language, rather than in mother tongue languages, and the syllabus reflects the Burmese majority, rather than Indigenous culture and history.⁴ As a result of the pandemic and the coup, children across the country have been starved of

4. South, A. and Lall, M., 2016. Language, education and the peace process in Myanmar. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, pp.128-153

education, and local and Indigenous communities fear for the future of the next generation.

In addition to poor access to vital services such as health and education, Indigenous in Myanmar also have tenuous access to critical amenities such as water and electricity. Among villages researched by ABIPA, 45% depend only on rain, streams and rivers for water, while 27% have access to a pipe that support access to clean water. Dependence on natural water sources for survival has rendered Indigenous communities extremely vulnerable to the impact of expanding extractive operations, such as gold mining, that regularly dump mine tailings and waste into nearby waterbodies.

Deepening Pressures on Food and Livelihood Security

As well as having declining access to vital services, food and livelihood security of Indigenous communities is also being put under great pressures by both the coup and the growing impacts of climate change. Research respondents across all regions reported that their livelihoods have become increasingly fraught, and that poverty is fast rising.

Indigenous communities depend largely on land and forest-based livelihoods, including upland cultivation, growing perennial fruit orchards, and collection of non-timber forest products, at times these livelihoods are supplemented by wage labor such as construction or artisanal gold panning. Transportation to sell local goods and agricultural produce has become increasingly difficult, as a result of rising fuel prices, and a rapid proliferation in military check-points which often extort money from passersby and have led to growing fear and a deterioration in personal security. As a result, many communities report that it is no longer worth travelling to the market to sell produce, as profits would already be spent before they arrive, and that risks of arbitrary detention or assault are too high.

Increasing difficulties caused by the onset of climate change have also presented livelihood challenges for communities. Indigenous communities interviewed for this study say that rainy seasons are decreasing, resulting in declining crop yields, which communities predict will worsen in years to come. In addition to this, rising mining and resource extraction projects are also having detrimental impacts on agricultural lands and forests upon which Indigenous and local communities depend.

For example, mining waste has flooded agricultural lands across villages in Tachileik, rendering them infertile and barren.

As a result of growing pressures on livelihood and food security, communities have had to search for alternative livelihood strategies. Some communities have been forced to sell their lands and assets to repay debts caused by collapsing livelihoods, and others have been forced to move away from traditional agricultural livelihoods and spend time engaging in small-scale gold mining instead.

Natural Resource Extraction and Local Conservation Efforts

Putao – Kachin State

In the past, the forests in Putao, known by Indigenous Rvawang communities Rvawanmong, were rich with timber, rattan and a host of rare medicinal plants such as Shipati, which is found in the northern snow-capped mountains. Likewise, the Mali Kha River, the main river flowing through the region, hosted an abundance of fish, and rich agricultural land underpinned food sovereignty for Indigenous Lisu, Rvawang and other Kachin communities. Overexploitation of natural resources over the past ten years as well changing weather patterns as a result of the onset of climate change, however have up-turned livelihoods and food security of local communities. As a result, many communities have turned to small-scale gold mining, selling gold that they find to a landscape of multiplying medium to large-scale gold mining operations that have opened up along the river since the coup.

Fast expansion of unregulated gold mining along Putao's stream and river banks have had serious ecological impacts, including the erosion of river banks and neighboring agricultural lands, and pollution of streams and rivers with mercury and siltation. Interviewees report that mines have consumed the agricultural lands of many residents, and that as the situation worsens, they worry



Figure 2: Figure 10: Some gold mining on the river bank or river bed in Putao

what will become of their livelihoods. There are no efforts from authorities to regulate expanding mining, and other commercial resource extraction ventures such as fishing and hunting. Indigenous communities in the area want resource extraction for commercial purposes to be banned.

Myitkyina – Kachin State

Myitkyina is home to bountiful mixed deciduous forests, which in the past were rich teak (jun pyin), iron wood (pyin-ka-doe), and champak (sakawa), and which have for generations been sustained by Indigenous Kachin communities. Located just 20 miles south of Myitsone, the confluence of the Mali Kha and N'Mai Kha rivers and a place of enormous cultural significance to Kachin communities, Myitkyina had an abundant source of fish resources that could satisfy the subsistence of local households. In recent years, however there has been an expansion of crony-backed commercial resource extraction operations that have seen expansive logging of forest resources, and has seen fishing rights sold to large companies at the expense of resource dependent communities.

Following the coup, residents report that there has been a rapid expansion of gold mining around Myitsone. Mining has changed the color of the water, has eroded river banks, and is causing irreparable damage to the area, viewed as a site of enormous spiritual and cultural heritage by communities in the area. Mining in the area is being conducted in large part by Jade Land Myanmar Company Ltd., owned by wealthy Kachin tycoon Yup Zau Hkawng along with other affiliates, possibly with Chinese investment. While the company only obtained a license small-scale mining on a 4-acre

plot, the company has bought surrounding lands and has expanded its operations using large-scale mining machinery. This highlights the lawless nature of resource extraction in Kachin State following the military coup.



Figure 3: Figure 11: The aerial scenes of gold mining on the river bank in Myitsone



Figure 4: Figure 12: Gold mine in Mazup (left) and Khung Bu (right)

Local communities and activists have discovered that Jade Land Company won the gold mining contract in the name of “restoration, conservation and beautification” along the banks of Myitsone, while instead extracting, exploiting, and destroying surrounding ecosystems. Communities in the area wrote a statement regarding the irreparable damage caused to the natural heritage in the area, stating that soil formation has been damaged beyond repair, and that it is causing erosion and landslides of the river banks.

Tachileik – Eastern Shan State

Tachileik, in Eastern Shan State, is home to rich montane forests. Indigenous Akkah, Lahu and Shan communities depend on non-timber forests such as bamboo, rattan, and forest fruits and vegetables for household consumption. While communities depend on forest resources, the region is also rich in sub-soil resources such as manganese dioxide, gold and platinum, which are mined by outside companies. The map below shows the vast number of mining sites and operating companies in the region.



Figure 5: Source: Map of mine sites in Tachileik

Mining in several villages in Tachileik have been subject to mining operations since 2009. Mined for magnesium dioxide and platinum, there are approximately 15 mining companies and a refinery plant operating in the area, under local names but with Chinese investment, these include; San Paremi, Myint U Aung, Sai Long Hein, Wanna Thein Than, Kyauk Saung Ni, Hein Lin San, Maha Shwe La Wun (now renamed as White Gold Sky Palace), Sai Wunna, Nway Oo Yanant, Maung Maung Aye, Kyaw Kyaw Sein, Sein Naw, Golden Forest, Ruby Dragon and an unknown mineral refinery plant. Companies exploiting resources in the area made deals with local militias and village administrators, and confiscated local residents' farmlands without any consultation. In one village, about 400 acres of village lands have been transformed into mining blocks.

Communities in the area have suffered from environmental damages caused by mining in the area. Environmental damages include improper disposal of mining waste, soil erosion, and flooding of agricultural lands with mine tailings, which flow into neighboring streams and destroy local waterbodies. As a result, many community members have lost their agricultural lands, and others have seen their lands become infertile due to pollution from mine runoff. In addition to damage to community farmlands, mines have also expanded into local forests, causing deforestation and degradation of biodiversity. Community members report that mining has caused the extinction of local herbal medicines that they previously relied upon, that wild animals such as muntjac and wild boar can no longer be found in the forest, and aquatic animals such as fish, shrimp and crabs which in past years were abundant, can no longer be found in streams and rivers in the area.





Figure 6: Mines in Tachileik

Increasing pollution in streams, creeks and rivers throughout the area has caused growing anxieties among local communities regarding pollution. Communities report that there is an increasing occurrence of health problems, and has compromised the main sources of drinking water for over 15 villages.

Tanintharyi Township – Tanintharyi Region

In villages along the Tanintharyi river, the main non-timber forest products that communities depend upon are timber, bamboo, rattan, elephant foot yam, bamboo shoots, mushrooms and honey, which are available throughout the surrounding forests. Rivers and creeks in the area support a large diversity of fish, which underpins local subsistence. Local communities depend on a mix of upland cultivation and agroforestry for their livelihoods.

As well-being abundant in forest products, natural water bodies, and rich agricultural lands that support the livelihoods and local practices of Indigenous Karen communities in the area, Tanintharyi Region also sits on a major tin belt, as well as a number of other mineral deposits such as gold and coal. While communities have long co-existed with the surrounding forests, the arrival of large-scale commercial mining and logging operations into the area have caused many challenges for local communities and the ecosystems on which they depend. According to research conducted by ABIPA, since the military coup, community members report that gold mining has expanded in the area, using heavy machinery to mine along creeks and streams, causing rapid environmental devastation.



Figure 7: Environmental damages due to the gold mining along Bawlu Creek



Figure 8: Gold mining on the bank of the confluence of Tanintharyi river and Bawlu Creek

Currently four businessmen; Arr Chan, a Chinese businessman, Pado Nyawa, Karen National Union (KNU) Tanintharyi Township Leader, ABC company, a Myeik based company, and Ko Shein, a local businessman are operating gold mines at the mouth of Balaw creek, a tributary of the Tanintharyi River. These four groups were granted a six-month gold exploration permit by both the SAC and the KNU, and are currently running a large-scale operation using eleven backhoes, which is causing rapid and serious damage to the river bed and banks. Local residents report that Balaw Creek has been destroyed in only 6 months, fish species have been displaced due to growing pollution, and mining waste and siltation dumped into streams have blocked the water flow. Communities living downstream on the Tanintharyi River also say that they have experienced impacts of expanding mining operations.

Indigenous Karen communities in Tanintharyi Region maintain close relationships with their surrounding forests and biodiversity, and play an active role in sustaining them, both by promoting sustainable resource use and protecting them from large-scale development projects. Communities throughout Tanintharyi Region have established local community-based organizations through which they have conducted local conservation activities prior to the coup, however following the coup, participation collective action and Indigenous peoples organizations has significantly reduced, as villagers fear reprisals by the military.⁵



Figure 9: The prayer ceremony of on the 'River-day' in 2022

Thandaunggyi – Karen State

Thandaunggyi, located in the mountains of northern Karen State, is home to Indigenous Karen communities, who manage over large expanses of rich deciduous forests in their territories. Community held forests contain valuable tree species including teak, iron wood, and bamboo, and a breadth of non-timber forest products such as orchids, honey, bamboo shoots, mushrooms and vegetables. Indigenous communities in the area have many uses for bamboo, including mat and basket weaving, crafting pipes, hats, hunting tools, bird cages, and musical instruments such as xylophones, flutes and clappers. Communities recount, however, that while in the past they had access to a vast array of different bamboo species, some have disappeared due to growing commercial extraction. Communities in the area report that forests are still in good condition, despite experiencing the increasing onset of climate change such as droughts and record-breaking temperatures, which have upset agricultural cycles.

Conclusion

For generations, Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar have sustained some of the largest and most globally important forests and biodiversity in South East Asia. From the snow-capped peaks of Putao, to the tropical evergreen forests and marine ecosystems of Tanintharyi Region, Indigenous communities have protected and sustained the fragile ecosystems on which they depend, using local democratic customary systems in order to manage resource use and access rights. Across the country, Indigenous communities depend upon their forests for non-timber forest products such as vegetables, mushrooms, herbal medicines, bamboos, and fruits, and careful management of these resources have meant that forests have been able to continue to support a large array of plant and animal species.

Following the 2021 military coup, Myanmar's forests and their custodian communities have come under unprecedented pressures. The military coup has unleashed chaos across the country, suspending the rule of law and enabling the rich and powerful to exploit and plunder the country's land and resources with impunity. In Kachin State we have seen how proliferating gold mining driven by crony companies have polluted streams and rivers, destroyed cultural heritage sites, and eroded and damaged agricultural lands. Likewise in Eastern Shan State, hundreds of communities have been displaced by large-scale mining projects that have polluted and destroyed surrounding agricultural lands. And finally, in Tanintharyi Region, rapidly expanding gold and tin mining led by state and ethnic militaries have already caused cataclysmic damage to local riverine ecosystems upon which communities depend for their livelihoods.

While in past, many of these issues communities could address through local action, the military coup poses a huge risk to the ability of communities to respond. Community committees and organizations can no longer command the large membership they once had, and organizing conservation activities is now an extremely dangerous endeavor. Indeed, many have been arrested, assaulted, or murdered for doing so. Indigenous communities and environmental defenders, who stand on the front lines of the global biodiversity loss and climate change, are losing their freedom to protect.

This research briefing, prepared by Indigenous communities across the country, has shown the impacts of that the military coup has had on indigenous communities and their territories, and calls upon communities, environmental defenders, non-governmental organizations and other actors to redouble efforts to protect Myanmar's forests and biodiversity during this period of extreme hardship. It is only with the wisdom, endurance and knowledge of Indigenous peoples that these forests will be sustained.



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