

Endangered Villages Due To Illegal Minings



"I strongly oppose the existence of these gold mines. The practice of gold mining has led to the depletion of our region's forests, mountains, and people's farmlands. To make matters worse, the miners have now turned to the river and are encroaching on our village. Unless we put an end to this destructive activity, our village is at risk of disappearing within the next year. "

(A Resident)

Content

Summary.....	4
Introduction	5
Purpose	5
Methodology.....	6
Findings	7
Environmental And Social Impacts	7
The Adverse Effects of Gold Mining	7
Harmful Impacts of Gold Mining on People and Animals	8
Rising Crime and Decreasing Security Measures in the Village	8
Human Rights Violations and Helpless Residents	9
Gold Mining Near The Village	9
Beginning of the Mining	9
Permit Granting Authorities.....	10
Efforts To Stop Gold Mining	11
Suggestions	12
Remark	13



Summary

To gather information for this report, a Focus Group Discussion was organized in Kachin State's Myitkyina Township, specifically located north of Bala Min Htin Bridge. Approximately 20 local villagers who reside in a village situated along the Irrawaddy River participated in the discussion. These villagers had established a steering committee to combat the ongoing illegal gold mining activities in the vicinity of their settlement. This report provides an account of the detrimental effects of gold mining on the villagers' livelihoods and environment, as well as their perspectives on resolving the issue.

Introduction

Gold production has a long history along the Ayeyarwady, May Kha, and Malikha Rivers in Myanmar, with most excavations conducted by locals for their livelihoods using manual digging and small capacity water pumps. However, illegal gold mining has been on the rise since the military coup on February 1, 2021, with large machinery causing destruction of homes and farms of local villagers, along with threats to their safety, social and economic well-being, and increased crime. The Myanmar Resource Watch conducted a survey in a village on the banks of the Irrawaddy River in Myitkyina Township to assess the environmental damage caused by illegal gold mining in the Myitsone area of Kachin State, where people have died due to gold mining and residents have experienced loss of farms and gardens, increased crime, insecurity, and other losses.

Purpose

This report aims to inform people across the country about the violence and concerns faced by local people on their own farm lands as a result of illegal gold mining, and to support relevant officials and organizations (NUG, NGOs, INGOs) in addressing this issue.

Methodology

A Focus Group Discussion was utilized to gather information regarding the issue of illegal gold mining in the village. Individual interviews were also conducted with those who have experienced damage to their farmlands as a result of the mining, as well as with the gold mining entrepreneurs. The questioning method did not impose any restrictions based on gender or age, allowing anyone who was directly or indirectly involved in the gold mining process or affected by it to participate. Despite multiple attempts, the current village administrator and deputy administrator did not respond to requests for an interview.



The Focus Group Discussion was held in a village located on the banks of the Irrawaddy River in Myitkyina Township, Kachin State. The village is home to approximately 500 houses and benefits from good transportation all year round due to its well-connected roads and waterways. There is a primary school in the village for basic education, as well as a high school and a rural dispensary. The majority of the village's residents are Kachin people, and farming and gardening are their primary occupations.

Findings

Environmental And Social Impacts

The Adverse Effects of Gold Mining

The illegal gold mining in the Irrawaddy River near the village has resulted in a significant negative impact on the surrounding area. One of the major issues is the rate of riverbank collapse, which has been worsening every year. This collapse has caused the nearby village to lose its land and negatively affected the livelihoods of its residents. Interestingly, on the other side of the river where there is no gold mining, there is no significant collapse of the riverbank. The area of riverbank collapse caused by gold mining is about 3 miles long and 3 acres wide. Currently, the collapse is expanding inward daily, leaving only 300/400 feet of the village in some places. If this continues, the entire village will be destroyed, and the residents will have to be relocated within the next 1-2 years.

Moreover, the mines dump their tailings in the middle of the river, resulting in a rising riverbed and significant changes in the river's course. As a result, residents believe that their drinking water wells are drying up, and water resources in the village have been damaged due to the effect of gold mining in the river.

Harmful Impacts of Gold Mining on People and Animals

Each year, there are unfortunate incidents of children and elderly individuals accidentally falling and drowning in old gold mines. Furthermore, cattle have also died from falling while drinking water. The local community is concerned about the possibility of more accidental deaths of both people and animals at the mining sites.

Rising Crime and Decreasing Security Measures in the Village

Since the introduction of gold mining in the village, there has been a noticeable increase in drug-related activities. Previously, there were hardly any drug users among the villagers, but now the number of drug users has increased significantly. This increase has led to property loss and theft in the village. Consequently, the villagers are afraid to leave their belongings unattended. Furthermore, due to the arrival of strangers into the village, the women in the village feel unsafe and no longer feel comfortable in their village.

More Data and Findings

During the initial discussion held by the MRW group in that village, we aimed to gather information about the negative effects of illegal gold mining that had increased during the military coup. However, we also found out about the loss of wildlife in the region due to illegal logging and Chinese banana plantations, which was documented during our discussion. The disappearance of wild animals such as deer, elk, fish species, birds, and bees in the region was a major concern raised by the villagers.

Human Rights Violations and Helpless Residents

Gold Mining Near The Village

The gold mining operations near the village are not carried out by local residents, but rather by migrant workers brought in from other areas. In an interview with the miners, they revealed that a powerful business person had coerced the village elders into allowing the mining to take place. The excavation work is conducted using heavy machinery on the riverbank adjacent to the village, without any communication or consultation with the local community.

Beginning of the Mining

Chinese miners used to operate in the Irrawaddy River near the village, but they had to stop due to the collective protests of the villagers. Some illegal mining activities were also shut down during the National Democratic Government's (NLD) rule. However, after the military coup in 2021, all mining activities have resumed, and this time, the residents were unable to stop them as officials turned a blind eye for monetary gain.



Permit Granting Authorities

According to villagers and those who oppose gold mining, the people who allow gold mining are the armed organizations in that area and current village administrators and related authorities. According to the village residents and business people in the village, the village administrator and officials have been demanding money from the gold miners claiming to be village funds. Although village wise meeting was called about residents not agreeing to the gold mining and told the village administrator to stop all the mining and ban gold miners, the requests were denied.

"People who does the mining have to pay money to various organizations such as army, the government departments and all the armed organizations in the region. Anyone can do the gold mining these days if they have a huge bag of money" (A Resident)

Efforts To Stop Gold Mining

When the villagers confronted the gold miners and warned them about the consequences of illegal mining, some of the miners left while others remained and continued their work. The miners attempted to negotiate with the protestors, but the villagers rejected their offer, stating that they could only proceed if the entire village agreed to it. A petition against gold mining near the village was signed by 58.24% of the residents. However, due to the current political climate, the villagers are unsure who to report their grievances to.

" Currently, we are facing a situation where there are numerous governing parties, leaving us uncertain as to whom we can rely on. We find ourselves fearing both sides of the government, as well as anyone wielding a firearm."

(A Resident)

Suggestions

According to information gathered during the village discussion, illegal gold mining has seen a significant surge since the military coup, with miners paying hefty sums to local armed organizations in the region. This flagrant use of power is a clear instance of local bullying, and the resource-rich regions and their people bear the brunt of the negative effects of illegal mining. Myanmar Resource Watch (MRW) has previously documented similar situations in other regions of Myanmar, highlighting the urgent need for action.

In light of this, we strongly recommend that the National Unity Government (NUG) not only investigate the regions where illegal resource mining is taking place, but also put in place strict policies through relevant township public administration organizations for both permit holders and permit granting authorities. We also recommend that local armed organizations in areas with rampant illegal mining collaborate with the local community to establish a sustainable social and environmental ecosystem by putting an end to unwanted resource mining activities. By taking a collaborative and proactive approach, we believe that it is possible to mitigate the harmful effects of illegal mining and promote a more equitable and sustainable future for all.

Remark

Myanmar Resource Watch (MRW) considers all mining operations under the military council, which seized power by force rather than a government elected by the people, to be illegal mining operations. As such, illegal gold mining encompasses all mining activities that are currently in operation.

The Myanmar Resource Watch (MRW) compiled the aforementioned report based on data collected from a village located on the bank of the Irrawaddy River, situated north of Bala Min Htin Bridge within the Myitkyina Township of Kachin State. To ensure the safety of the interviewees, their identities have been withheld.