

## **Burma (Myanmar): Forced Labor in the World's Last Teak Forest**

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### **Introduction**

Indigenous peoples in Burma, the Karen being the most numerous, have been impressed into slave labor to harvest the world's last sizable forests of teak by the country's military rulers. The military also has impressed large numbers of Asian elephants into the teak logging trade, pumped them full of addictive methamphetamines, and work them literally to death. The Burmese military government, which has thrown out democratic election results for the country as a whole, also has been using logging roads to allow access for oil and gas exploration in indigenous homelands comprising the "panhandle" in the country's far south. Boycotts of Burmese teak have been organized by environmental activists in the United States and Europe, where the valuable wood is most often used in Scandinavian-style furniture. Large amounts of teak also are sold (much of it harvested in Burma, but processed in Thailand and China) for luxury yachts and other pleasure boats. In addition to the world's last teak forests, Burma territory includes some of the largest virgin rainforests remaining in mainland Asia. Many of these forests are home to rare species, such as the Asian Rhino, Asian Elephant among others, as well as the aforementioned indigenous peoples.

### **History of Burma's Junta and the Burmese Teak Harvest**

Burmese teak logging began in earnest during the British colonial period. British demand for ships made of the durable wood consumed most of the commercially viable teak in India and eventually in Thailand and Cambodia. By the late-twentieth century, teak had become so rare in all of these countries that its export was banned under most circumstances. Destruction of teak forests also has provoked flooding and drought in parts of these countries. By the late 1990s, commercial-scale teak production was restricted almost entirely to Burma. In 1994, it was estimated that Burma held 80 per cent of the world's remaining natural teak (Stevens, 1994).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, forests covered 80 per cent of Burma. In 1948, 72 per cent of the country was forested. By 1988, Burma's forest cover had decreased to about 47 per cent of its land area. By the late 1990s, a decade later, Burma's forest cover was estimated to be roughly 36 per cent. By the turn of the millennium, Burma was experiencing the third-highest rate of deforestation in the world, after Brazil and Indonesia, at roughly 8,000 square kilometers a year (Keating, 1997).

A military coup in Burma during 1962 initiated a reign of terror and oppression that continues to this day. In 1988, after tens of thousands of Burmese rallied for democracy, the military junta formed the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) to strengthen its domination of Burmese government. The SLORC, composed of several high-level generals, ordered the killing of roughly 3,000 dissident Burmese demonstrators in 1988, during widespread unrest.

Continued protests and unrest forced the junta to call general elections, during which its opponents won 82 per cent of the seats in Parliament. The military then nullified these results, and refused to yield power. The SLORC generals consolidated their rule with forced labor, rape, torture, forced relocation, and intimidation (Teak is Torture, 1997). The same methods were used against the Karen indigenous people as the junta sought to raise foreign exchange by harvesting world's last sizable stands of teak.

Until the late 1990s, large areas of southern and eastern Burma remained relatively free of military rule due to resistance of numerous indigenous ethnic groups such as the Mon, Karen and Karenni. However, with a massive infusion of new capital, largely from selling natural-gas concessions offshore, an "ethnic cleansing" operation was initiated by the junta in an attempt to consolidate its rule in rural areas of Burma. Much of this capital came from large American energy corporations (notably Unocal and Texaco); the French energy giant Total, and a Thai company, PTT. The hardwood forests of southern Burma were concessioned, with indigenous peoples often supplying unwilling forced labor. According to local observers, this "cleansing" involved "burning of villages, raping and torturing of villagers, forced labor, and forced relocations" (Teak is Torture, 1997).

The SLORC's Minister for Forestry, Lieutenant General Chit Shwe, stated during 1997 that Burma's teak forests would be logged to increase economic development "with support from the private sector" (Teak is Torture, 1997). In practical terms, this meant that forest-products exports were exempted from commercial tax after May, 1996. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, a leader of the Burmese National League for Democracy, called this kind of economic development "crony capitalism". According to the National League, "The generals and their friends get rich, while the Burmese populace starves" (Teak is Torture, 1997).

Some of the largest buyers of Burmese teak in Europe are Scandinavian furniture manufacturers which supply several retail chains in the United States and Europe, including Scandinavian Design, Happy Viking, Scan Design, and Dania. Some of the manufacturers and retailers assert that their sales of Burmese teak are helping that nation achieve "economic development" (Teak is Torture, 1997). During the late 1990s, the Burmese democratic government-in-exile called for an international boycott of teak from Burma. The boycott included teak exported from Thailand, Singapore and Taiwan that is Burmese in origin.

According to an analysis by Rainforest Relief, teak logging, like most tropical deforestation, causes extreme degradation of tropical forests. Teak trees are sporadically dispersed throughout the forest, so loggers travel long distances into primary forests, creating miles of roads used to haul teak logs to mills. Logging roads play a fundamental role in allowing further deforestation of primary forests in Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. Roads also serve as conduits for other invasions of indigenous lands, including prospectors for various

metals and minerals, squatters looking for land and (especially in Burma's case) troops charged with forging the indigenous population into a slave-labor force for the harvesting of salable teak.

Intense logging in indigenous areas of Burma has aggravated flooding during seasonal monsoons. According to a report by Tim Keating of Rainforest Relief,

As forests are cleared, rain runs off instead of being absorbed by the forest and recirculated into the environment slowly. This also leads to periods of drought, both of which adversely affect local peoples' ability to grow food. Erosion is exacerbating flooding and [has] caused silting of rivers, affecting fish populations,)having a negative impact on local people" (Keating, 1997).

In addition, Burmese and Thai loggers use elephants to move logs, drugging the animals with large amounts of methamphetamines, to which they can become addicted. Spurred to work harder by the drugs, many elephants become ill and die (Teak is Torture, 1997).

By the early 1990s, teak had become the second-largest legal money-maker for the Burmese military (not counting its illegal trade in heroin). In 1992 and 1993, Burma extracted nearly one million cubic tons of teak logs with state-owned or contracted operations, up from 700,000 in 1983 (Teak is Torture, 1997). China is the largest importer of teak logs from Burma, followed by Thailand. A large proportion of this teak is processed for export as lumber, furniture and other consumer items (including luxury yachts and other pleasure boats) for sale in the United States and Europe.

### **Testimonies of Torture**

Indigenous activists and environmental organizations have collected many testimonies of torture related to forced labor by indigenous peoples in the Burmese teak harvest. A few of these testimonies follow:

- A teak-forested hill behind Moug Pyin town was selected for the newly arrived Light Infantry Battalion 360. People from Moug Pyin and surrounding villages were ordered to clear it, and the felled logs were sold in Keng Tung town, with the money shared by Brigade Commander Bohmu Htin Gyaw of LIB 43 and Brigade Commander of LIB 360. The labor was unpaid; workers were subject to a fine and jail for refusing to work. Those who complained sometimes were subjected to torture. Nearby forests were cleared for firewood and charcoal for the army. Construction materials for barracks were supplied by local people without compensation (Keating, 1997).
- In Kengtung, Number 244 Battalion forced people to cut all the trees in a nearby forest. They also used porters from other places to clear the trees. The cut logs were then taken to an Army base. The Army ordered all trees harvested, including the natural forest, as well as trees planted by the villagers for their own use. When the villagers protested, the soldiers refused to listen. As a result, all of the local mountains became barren, contributing to flooding during monsoon rains (Keating, 1997).
- Everyone in an unnamed town and its surrounding area were forced to work in rotating shifts. Each village and section of town was directed to send people to work two of each three months. "Each day," reported one conscript, "My section of town has to

send [as many as] 20 people, depending on how many the soldiers demand. There are 60 houses in my section. I've had to go twice to cut the trees, for one day each time. We had to take all our own tools, machetes and saws. They make us cut everything down, even the bamboo trees. Then we have to dig out the stumps too, and give them to the Army. It's all taken away by Army trucks" (Keating, 1997).

- The Burmese Na Sa Ka forces of Buthidaung township ordered the Muslim villages on the west bank of the Mayu River to supply 5,000 people to the Na Sa Ka for road construction, building embankments and logging in the Mayu hill. These laborers are further ordered to work continuously for 10 days and to cut 6000 trees (Keating, 1997).
- Another conscript told an observer for the Burma Students' Union: "There are three concentration labor camps in the Babow valley of the Tamu township in the Saggaing Division). Wet Shu camp was the first to be built and the main camp of the three. The camp was constructed by the porters from nearby villages. The prisoners were divided into six teams for sawing. The sawing stands were one to two hours' walk from the camp in the forests. During 1994, three prisoners [broke] their legs in accidents with logs. No compensation was provided for the prisoners (All Burma Students, 1995).
- In the Toungoo district, most of the forced labor was used for construction of roads, and most of these roads directly benefited military efforts or powerful business interests taking part in teak logging and oil exploration. Laborers also were forced to build a road between Papun to Parheik, to a large military base. From Paheik, this road was extended northwards to Kyauk Nyat on the Salween river, on the border with Thailand. The river itself has always served as the major transportation artery in the area, both for military purposes and logging interests. Soldiers and timber traders ply the river from dawn to dusk in long-tail boats. When the access road is completed, it will greatly facilitate movement of troops through the area, as well as the transport of logs and timber to Rangoon (Images Asia, 1996).
- The price of resistance in the teak forests can be painful. When soldiers dislike a villager, reports indicate that they beat him with sticks. "Sometimes," according to one first-hand account, "They beat them so hard that they had to be carried to hospital" (Karen Human Rights, 1996a).
- During the first week of March 1997, the villagers from Min Tha village were subjected to forced labor. Men, women and even aged people were directed to remove teak from the jungle for the Burmese Army. Forced laborers were beaten by soldiers. One villager was severely beaten and his leg broken, as the Army denied him medical treatment. Relatives brought the beating victim to the Tamu Government Hospital, where treatment was denied. After a trip of many miles on foot, medical treatment was administered at Kalay Myo (Free Trade Unions, 1997).

The Karen Human Rights Group linked the cutting of trees to changes in local climate.

They have been cutting so many trees that the climate is now changing here and it has become drier, so every year the rice harvest is worse. Usually the traders hire villagers to cut the trees. They pay them 250 Kyat for a ton but then they sell the logs for 12,000 Kyats a ton. The traders

get permits to cut the trees by bribing the military (Karen Human Rights Group, 1996b).

### **The Junta Disowns Its Own Policies**

A United States human-rights group has accused the Myanmar (Burma) military government of maintaining forced labor despite its own declaration stating that coerced labor is illegal. At one point, the military junta even issued a decree making the requisitioning of forced labor punishable by a maximum of one year in jail and a fine under section 374 its Penal Code.

Human-rights groups consider this decree to be public-relations window-dressing that has no practical effect on real-world conditions in Burma's teak forests. Human Rights Watch, based in New York City, has said that it "had clear evidence" of continuing forced labor indicating that the aforementioned decree was passed only to avoid international criticism, not to change the junta's behavior (Human Rights, 2001). The allegation by Human Rights Watch was issued a week before the governing body of the International Labor Organization was scheduled to meet in Geneva to review progress by Burma toward ending forced labor. "Either the Burmese government thought it could avoid international pressure by a sham decree or it just has made no effort to enforce the ban," Sidney Jones, Asia director for Human Rights Watch, was quoted as saying (Human Rights, 2001).

Myanmar has long been assailed by the United Nations and Western countries for suppression of democracy and its human-rights record, including its use of unpaid civilian labor on infrastructure projects. The junta's officers have maintained that civilians contribute their labor voluntarily to promote development of their nation. The Human Rights Watch statement called on the junta to enforce the decree and grant access to independent observers who will monitor compliance. Human Rights Watch said it conducted interviews in Thailand's Chiang Mai province in late February, 2001 with many Myanmar people "who had been recently subjected to forced labor" (Human Rights, 2001).

Human Rights Watch cited the case of one ethnic Shan farmer who said that in January, a local unit of the Myanmar military forced him to dig trenches and fence-post holes for a military base in Ton Hu in Shan State's Nam Zarng Township. The farmer and about 20 other villagers said that they were forced to travel to the site five times during the month for two to three days at a time. Villagers were compelled to provide their own food and to sleep at the work site. None of them were not compensated for their labor (Human Rights, 2001).

### **Oil Corporations and Forced Labor**

Eyewitnesses in Burma have reported, according to Drillbits and Tailings (from reports by the international human-rights group EarthRights and the United States Embassy in Rangoon) that coerced labor has been used to build a Burmese natural-gas pipeline. The consortium building the Yadana pipeline includes the French oil company Total, the United States firm Unocal, the Petroleum Authority of Thailand (which is run by the Thai government), and MOGE, Burma's state-owned oil-and-gas company.

The Yadana and Yetagun pipeline projects cross the southeastern Tenasserim region of Burma, pumping gas from offshore wells in the Andaman Sea to power plants in neighboring

Thailand. (New Evidence, 2000) The pipelines are being built from the Yadana gas field off the coast of southern Burma, through the Tenasserim rainforest, then into Thailand.

Deserters from the Burmese Army have reported that they were ordered on a primary mission to secure the area on behalf of the oil companies. "Securing" the area, according to the eyewitnesses, "included the construction of a string of military bases, intimidation and terror against villagers, and forcible relocation of entire villages" (New Evidence, 2000). According to the same reports, military housing was built with forced, unpaid labor, including young children. These reports were denied by the government.

Unocal employee Joel Robinson told the U.S. Embassy in Rangoon that Unocal had hired members of the Burmese military as security guards for the Yadana pipeline. Soldiers also were said by Robinson to have been hired as supervisors for construction of helicopter landing sites. The military, in turn, forced unpaid laborers to build the helipads. The Total company later provided some of the laborers with small amounts of money, much of which later was taken from them by soldiers (New Evidence, 2000).

On May 22, 2000, the same day that the U.S. Embassy's report was released, more than 100 demonstrators rallied at Unocal's annual meeting in suburban Brea, California to protest the treatment of the Burmese villagers. According to an account in *Drillbits & Tailings*, as drummers in skull masks performed with mock bones on upturned Unocal oil barrels outside, a shareholder resolution sought to scale Chief Executive Officer Roger Beach's salary according to the company's ethical performance, including its behavior on its Burma project. The proposal won approval of 16.4 per cent of the company's shareholders, which is high for a human-rights-based measure on a corporate ballot (New Evidence, 2000). The demonstration was organized by the Burma Forum of Los Angeles and endorsed by the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor.

Activism in the United States in opposition to coerced labor in Burma has been spearheaded by Ka Hsaw Wa, 29, director of EarthRights International. The name means "White Elephant," a nom de plume that he uses to avoid reprisals from Burma's military regime. Ka Hsaw Wa was born in Burma and was tortured by the junta for his environmental and human rights convictions before his subsequent escape to the United States. Ka Hsaw Wa, who is Karen, in 1988, at the age of 18, joined a massive demonstrations in Burma demanding human rights, democracy, and an end to military rule. He was arrested and tortured for three days (Earth Day, 2000). He was then forced to flee his home and go into hiding in the forests near the Thai border.

Slipping anonymously back and forth across the border between Burma and Thailand, Ka Hsaw Wa has documented environmental and human-rights abuses associated with construction of the Yadana Natural Gas Pipeline. He has called the pipeline "the most notorious project in Burma" because it is damaging the Tenasserim forest, which is home to many ethnic groups as well as many rare plants and animals (Earth Day, 2000). Ka Hsaw Wa is a winner of the \$125,000 1999 Goldman Prize for Asia. He also has been honored with the \$20,000 tenth annual Conde Nast Traveler Environmental Award. In 1999 he received the Reebok Human Rights Award.

"The Tenasserim rainforest is one of the largest intact rainforests in mainland Southeast Asia," said Ka Hsaw Wa. "The people of Burma do not want the pipeline, but Unocal wants it and builds it anyway. They have sent the brutal Burmese military dictatorship to protect their investment" (Earth Day, 2000). The Tenasserim rainforest is on the Isthmus of Kra, between the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand -- land that has long been occupied and used by the Karen and other indigenous peoples.

Ka Hsaw Wa described how the local people are forced to work for the pipeline, to carry ammunition and grow food for the soldiers. "Many villagers were forced to move from their land. Women have been raped and many have been killed," he said (Earth Day, 2000). "The same soldiers hired by the Unocal company who are oppressing people in the pipeline regions are also destroying the environment. They are catching wild animals, they are cutting down trees to sell, to grow food and other projects," Ka Hsaw Wa continued (Earth Day, 2000).

Corporate representatives of Unocal maintain that the company is improving the lives of the local people. "Unocal does not defend the actions and policies of the government of Myanmar [Burma]. We do defend our reputation and the integrity of the Yadana project. Our hope is that Myanmar will develop a vital, democratic society built on a strong economy. The Yadana project, which has brought significant benefits in health care, education, and economic opportunity to more than 40,000 people living in the pipeline area, is a step in the right direction," Unocal said in a statement on its website (Earth Day, 2000).

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