

Press release by the Shan State Farmers' Network and Shan Human Rights Foundation

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Gold mining companies try to buy silence of villagers impacted by toxic waste in eastern Shan State

The Shan State Farmers' Network (SSFN) and the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) deplore renewed attempts by gold mining companies to buy the silence of villagers impacted by toxic mining waste in eastern Shan State, instead of responding to their demands to stop mining and restore their lands.

Villagers in Na Hai Long, Tachileik township, have been suffering from the impacts of gold mining in the nearby Loi Kham hills for almost a decade. Their main water source has become clogged and polluted with cyanide-filled waste, and about 300 acres of fields have become unusable. In July 2014, in response to villagers' appeals, the Shan State Mining and Forestry Minister, Sai Ai Pao, ordered the mining to stop, but the order was overturned by Naypyidaw, and the mining has continued until today.

On February 28, 2016, four trucks belonging to three mining companies, Sai Saik Pyo Ye, Shwe Taung and Loi Kham Long, arrived at Na Hai Long village, and took about 30 villagers to the town of Tachileik to receive compensation for damage to their fields caused by toxic mining waste. The companies provided cash for 7 acres of land at a rate of 12,000 baht per acre. They promised up to 3 million baht for the entire village.

There had been no prior agreement with the village headman and other Na Hai Long residents about accepting this compensation, which is seen as a clear attempt to silence local opposition to the mining operations.

"The companies are pouring even more waste into our fields than before. How can we accept money from them to destroy our lives?" said a farmer from Na Hai Long.

The mining in Loi Kham has expanded since 2015, and another company, Shan Shweli, has recently begun excavations. The mines are guarded by Burmese government troops, who on October 13 last year shot dead a 54-year-old farmer from Na Hai Long called Loong Sarm, who had trekked up to the hills with fellow villagers to monitor the expanded mining operations.

Loong Sarm's family is trying to sue the military for the killing of Loong Sarm. On January 14, 2016, the first court hearing was held in Tachileik. Three Burmese soldiers admitted to shooting at Loong Sarm, but claimed that they were under attack from the villagers. In fact, Loong Sarm and other villagers were unarmed, and were walking back down the hills when they were shot at. There has been no date set for a further hearing.

SSFN and SHRF urge the incoming NLD-led government to implement federal reform to end Naypyidaw's unilateral power to grant mining concessions in ethnic areas.

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