



*Local people make houses with forest materials. (Photo by Myu Shadang).*

***"Dwellings are usually two stories built of wood and bamboo. Houses are oval in form; the first floor serves as storage and stables while the second is utilized for living quarters."***<sup>69</sup>

Before mines came, people had simple jobs - farming, hunting, and fishing for subsistence - and a good relationship with the local environment. However, the SPDC began to confiscate their rice fields and dig mines more than ten years ago, because their fields were along the Lido Highway.

***"In here there has been a lot of mining for ten years now. Before mining sites came, we were farming in our fields. But now, our rice fields have disappeared. Our rice fields are becoming mining sites. Our Shing Bwe Yang dwellers used to have their own rice fields but all of those rice fields have gone now."***<sup>70</sup>

- A local grandmother.

According to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights Article 17:

'(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.'

<sup>69</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hukawng\\_Valley#column one](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hukawng_Valley#column_one)

<sup>70</sup> Interview 9.



*Rice fields now mining sites. (Photo by Myu Shadang).*

The Burmese military regime is violating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and its own domestic property law, which states that if someone's action causes damage to another's property it violates domestic law.<sup>71</sup>

The law is supposed to protect public property. But everyone must follow the laws except the SPDC: in reality, we cannot see the 'rule of law' operating in Burma. The military junta acts however they want. Mining companies invade and confiscate farm fields to turn them into mining sites. Local farmers do not actually want to allow mining to take the place of their rice fields.

*"Some miners dig under the Shing Bwe Yang stream. Authorities limited mining in the area before; now they allow the digging of mines on local rice fields. At first nobody could enter into Shing Bwe Yang Township to dig mines. The town and the rice fields were separated by the Shing Bwe Yang stream. But, they gave permission to dig over the stream and into the Town. Shing Bwe Yang has four quarters. They already confiscated and started digging in all of the quarters except the first quarter. They saved the first quarter because the SPDC has offices, schools, a hospital, and some houses there. Now in the rainy season it floods every year because miners dig the stream."*<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Union of Myanmar Ya zatat kyī, Property Law (April 1963), Chapter 14, Article 268.

<sup>72</sup> Interview 10.

Mines are causing serious problems for the lives of the villagers. People do not have adequate food and clothing. The Burmese government has a responsibility to fulfill international law. Article 11 of the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) says that state parties must recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. It says that state parties must take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of these rights. The Burmese regime is violating these standards.

## Livelihood Problems

Local residents were experts in farming in the tradition of their ancestors. Until the mines came, local people were satisfied with their livelihoods and loved their land. Now they face a crisis of livelihood.

Every person has the right to work according to Article 6 of the ICESCR. This Convention states that each person has the right to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts. But in this mining area people no longer have work. The mines have taken over or destroyed traditional livelihoods. Some people work in the mines by hand but the work is difficult; the people have no expertise. It is hard for them to survive.



*Miners work with big machines. (Photo by Myu Shadang).*

***“Authorities give permission to dig mines on our farmlands. Companies confiscate them from farm owners. I didn’t want to sell my rice fields for mining. But they forced me to sell and threatened me.”<sup>73</sup>***

## **Social Problems**

Residents face an income crisis in Shing Bwe Yang Township; because of mining people’s rice fields are gone and they cannot plant vegetables. The population is growing at the same time that there is a lack of land for planting. People are forced to buy expensive vegetables and rice. Parents have to go to mining sites to make enough money to survive every day.



*High School, Shing Bwe Yang. (Photo by Myu Shadang).*

***“Nobody cares for their children to go to school and for an adult, for vocational training or something. Children follow their parents to the mining sites. Therefore, children in Shing Bwe Yang lack education.”<sup>74</sup>***

Parents also do not encourage their children in education because their priority is making money to survive. The mines have changed almost all aspects of the villagers’ lives, including their culture and dress. Before the mining sites, people used wood and bamboo for their houses. But now, they can not make them with those tools. They are very difficult to get. Materials that have been used by the people for a long time are disappearing. Before, the people were living with their families and they were satisfied. However, now there are many kinds of night-clubs and karaoke shops, encouraging corruption amongst local residents. Women and girls’ lives are also changing for the worse.

***“Some ladies and girls are going to work in the sex industry and in massage centers.”***

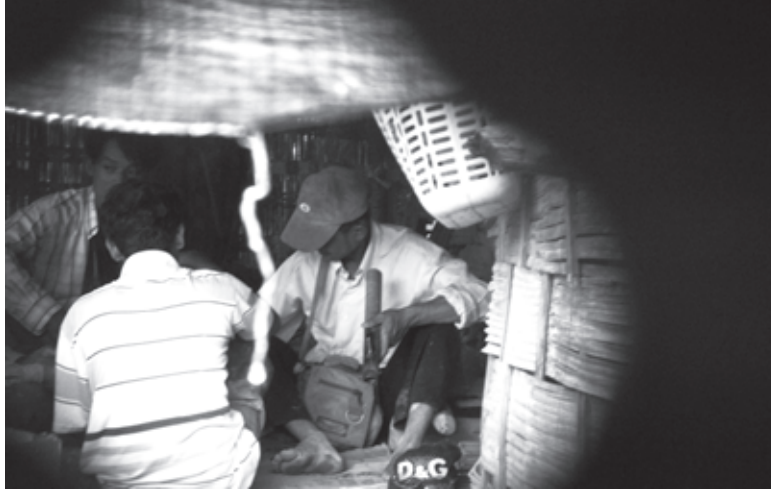
– A local NGO representative.

<sup>73</sup> Interview 9.

<sup>74</sup> Pan Kachin Development Society.

## Drug Distribution

In mining sites in the Hugawng Valley a lot of mining workers use opium and heroin. Opium and heroin use is causing corruption and other negative results in society and consequently all countries are against it. The Burmese military regime, however, still allows people to use these drugs. The authorities only pretend to clean up opium and heroin in Kachin State. In the Hugawng Valley mining sites, the authorities allow people to distribute drugs at the sites. No one checks to see if anyone is carrying heroin and businessmen cooperate with authorities to carry the heroin. Some people steal and also distribute the drugs.



*Some miners and local people use opium freely. (Photo by Myu Shadang).*

***"I know who is trading heroin and how they distribute it in here. But I don't want to tell that name. I knew how they steal when they arrive in the mining sites."*<sup>75</sup>**

Some drug carriers use women and girls to carry the drugs and be their victims.

***"They use ladies to carry heroin through checkpoints. The ladies hide it inside their bodies. They put heroin into a small bottle and then into a condom. After they arrive in mining sites, the drug is distributed freely."*<sup>76</sup>**

Almost all mining owners allow their workers to use opium and heroin. Workers believe that when they use opium during work time, they can concentrate better on their work.

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<sup>75</sup> Interview 15.

<sup>76</sup> Interview 15.

***“Some mining owners support opium and heroin use daily. They believe they can get more work done this way.”<sup>77</sup>***

– A mining worker

Before the mining sites came, local people only used opium for cultural medicine. Now there is a great amount of corruption and addiction in the community.

## **Displacement as Villagers Flee to Other Villages**

Most of Shing Bwe Yang’s people are poor. They were just farmers until mining sites started on their farms. When they started mining in Shing Bwe Yang, residents faced frequent forced relocation. Many people have been constantly threatened by the military and have become depressed and scared. Therefore, some of the local people flee to nearby Hkalung Village.

***“My aunt fled to Hkalung Village from Shing Bwe Yang Township. The authorities forced relocation over and over again and again.”<sup>78</sup>***

– A Shing Bwe Yang youth.

Most local residents face joblessness in their homeland. Some villagers try to work in the fields to the right side of the Lido Highway. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for them to farm there or get food. The SPDC recognized the right side of the Lido Highway as a conservation area without thinking about consequences for local people. Some farmers have been stealing land from inside the jungle but were caught and punished by the SPDC.

***“I am amazed by the SPDC. They don’t recognize what they have done to us. I am really hurt when I think about my rice fields. We must buy every vegetable and it is very expensive. How I will survive in future I don’t know.”<sup>79</sup>***



A grandmother points to where her rice field used to be.  
(Photo by Myu Shadang).

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<sup>77</sup> Interview 8.

<sup>78</sup> Interview 11.

<sup>79</sup> Interview 9.



(Photo by Myu Shadang).

## Conclusion

Gold mining in Hugawng Valley is destroying the environment and violating local livelihoods. The military regime makes money in the Hugawng Valley so that they can develop, and to buy military weapons. The junta has spent more than 40% of the national budget on the military, while IMF figures estimate that ‘under 1% of GDP is spent on health and education.’<sup>80</sup>

Military development is causing environmental problems in Tong Mali mining sites and destroying livelihoods in Shing Bwe Yang Township. The SPDC has been perpetrating these abuses for ten years; however, we cannot see any infrastructure growth in Kachin State. Miners do not benefit because they are heavily taxed. The Sea Sun Star Company and Burmese government benefit greatly from Hugawng Valley mining sites. Military camps increase every year in Kachin State; many are based in the Hugawng Valley so the government can extort money and goods from the public. Local people and mine workers give property and labor to the military and companies involuntarily.

<sup>80</sup> *Driven Away*, Kachin Women’s Association, Thailand, page 11.

The SPDC is violating human rights in Shing Bwe Yang Township. It confiscates local rice fields and no one is allowed to protest their actions. International law says that everybody has right to complain equally. However, this is not the case in Burma. The people of Shing Bwe Yang are made poorer and poorer by the Burmese military regime and its mines. The environment and local villages are being destroyed. The people are sacrificing their own land and lives to make money for the SPDC.

## **Recommendations**

### **To the State Peace and Development Council:**

- Stop violent action against the environment.
- Follow and implement domestic environmental law.
- Cooperate with local people to conserve the environment.
- Respect all international human rights conventions and customary laws.
- Stop human rights violations against Shing Bwe Yang dwellers.
- Respect local livelihoods.

### **To the Kachin Independent Organization (KIO):**

- Stop cooperating with the SPDC.
- Stop the violent action against the environment.
- Stop encouraging mining in the Hugawng Valley.

### **To the international community:**

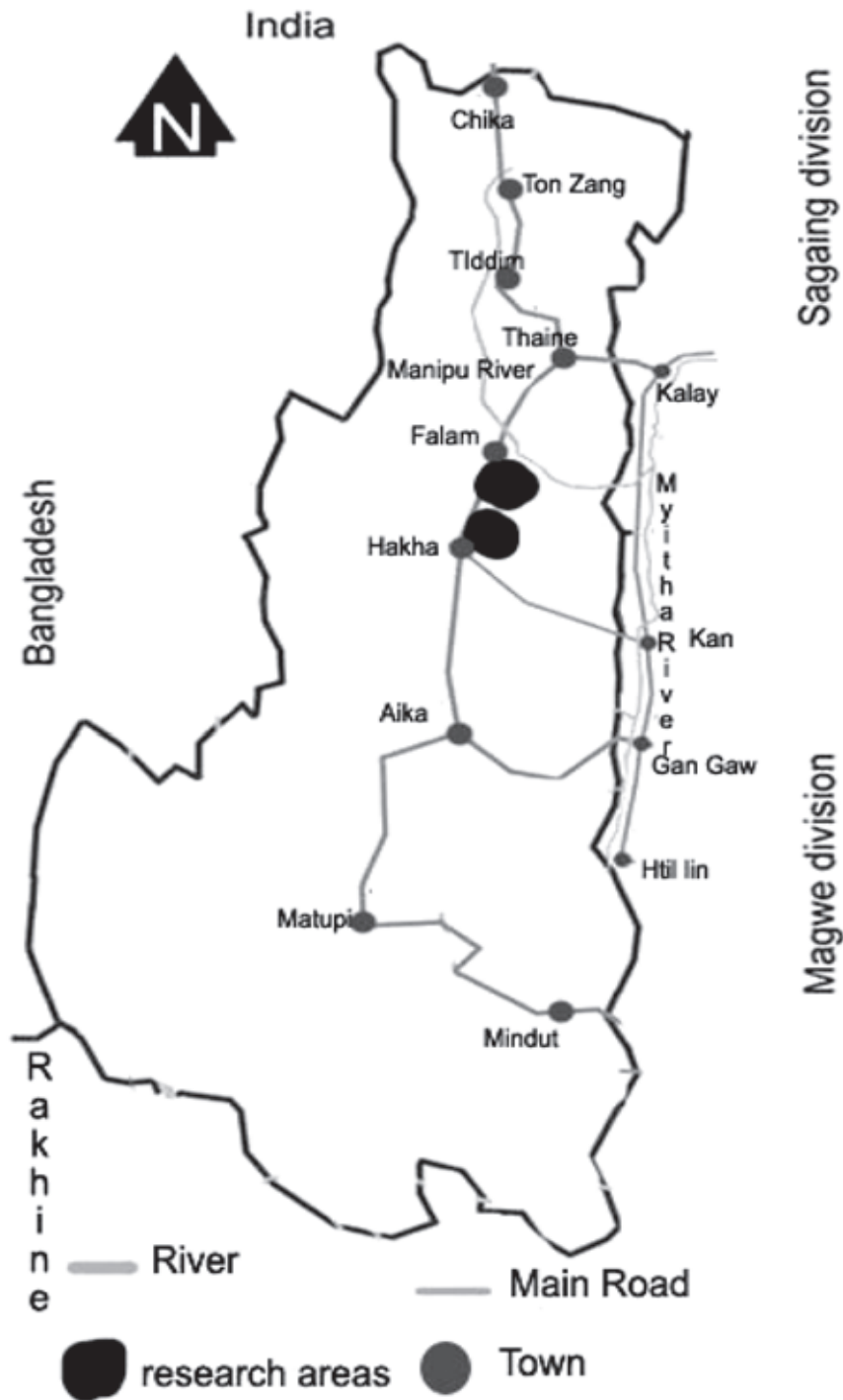
- Pressure the Burmese government to implement international conventions.
- Encourage the SPDC to implement environmental policy.
- Pressure the SPDC to stop human right violations in the whole of Burma.
- Pressure China to stop buying products from Burma.

### **To companies and miners in the Hugawng Mining Sites:**

- Stop cooperating and/or working with the SPDC.
- Stop destroying the environment in Hugawng Valley.
- Respect your positive cultural traditions.
- Think about future generations.

# Social & Environmental Impacts of Deforestation in Northern Chin State, Burma

By Icon



## Introduction

Trees are vital to the ecosystem that sustains human life. The Chin Hills are composed of mountains that were once covered with deep forests. They are inhabited by beautiful wild flowers and all kinds of wild animals. In the past, the Chin Hills forest produced enough resources, the river bore satisfactory products, and the fields gave sufficient food for humans.

After World War II, the Chin State was destroyed. People cannot survive like before. The population continues to increase and there is not enough food, animals, forest, or farms to support the population. The economic crisis has resulted in migration to the plains. In addition, since 1990, many people have left Chin State due to civil war. Although people did not want to leave their homes, they had no choice. Most of the Chin people have gone to other countries because they cannot get enough food or work in their own land.<sup>81</sup>

85% of Chin people are farmers and hunters; they have no other jobs. They spend their whole life in the forest. Chin people are dependent on farming so they need a sound environment, good weather and sustainable natural resources to work with. When the land is destroyed they face a lot of problems. "Unscientific cultivation systems and unwise traditional uses of the forests are causing environmental degradation and an ecological crisis. The lack of environmental and ecological knowledge is the root cause of environmental problems in the Chin Hills."<sup>82</sup>

The Burmese government does not support education, or economic or rural development. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) takes resources by force from the people because they need money to make their military stronger and for their own benefit. Most Chin people are uneducated. They do not know how to protect the environment.

Deforestation threatens the existence of all living creatures including humans and it causes further climate change. Today barren hills are appearing and beautiful wild flowers and valuable wild animals are disappearing due to deforestation. The weather is also changing these days. During the period of research that informed this paper, there was no rain until the end of May in Northern Chin

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<sup>81</sup> Thin Thang Journal Vol.1 (Community Development Initiative), November 2006, page 1.

<sup>82</sup> Thesis: 'Toward a new understanding of ecology in the Lai Christian community of the Chin Hills', Joel Za Hlei Kap, page 1.

State. Usually rain comes in March. People were waiting for the rain and were unable to cultivate their fields.

***“If the government continues to ignore rural development, there will be more deforestation and more negative environmental impacts in Northern Chin State.”***

This report reveals the ongoing economic crisis and lack of ecological awareness in the Chin community due to the SPDC’s actions. This report explains the causes of problems in Chin State and identifies solutions to solve those problems. Furthermore, the report seeks to develop a new understanding of ecology and its restoration through sustainable development. Sustainable development not only protects the environment but also reduces poverty.

The report proceeds as follows: Part 1 describes the background of Chin State and the Chin people. Part 2 identifies the causes of deforestation in Northern Chin State. Part 3 examines environmental problems caused by deforestation. Part 4 looks at social problems that result from this situation.

## **Methodology**

There were multiple stages involved in this research. First, I consulted with my mentors about where to perform my work and how I should do it. I also obtained advice from the local leader of the Chin community. I next did secondary internet research. Finally, to perform my fieldwork I went to Falam and Hakha Townships in Chin State. I interviewed twenty people including church pastors, the headmaster of theology, a lawyer, community leaders, elders, hunters, and farmers.

## **History**

### **Background of Chin State**

Chin State in Burma is bordered by India to its north, Rakhine State, Burma to its south, Bangladesh and India to its west and Magwe and Sagaing divisions to its east. It is 13,907 square miles. There are two districts: Falam district and Mindat district; and nine Townships: Falam, Hakha, Thlantlang, Tedim, Tonzang, Matupi, Mindat, Kanpalet and Paletwa, which are further divided into 505 village tracts.<sup>83</sup> Mountains in Chin State average 5000 feet in height (1523 meters). The highest

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<sup>83</sup> <http://www.asterism.info/states/13>: State and division Chin state

mountain is Khawnumtung (Victoria) located in Mindat district, at 10,200 feet (3109 meters).

Chin people typically work in agriculture; however, it has not developed as widely in the traditional sense because of a scarcity of large valleys and plains in Chin State. Rather, shifting cultivation is prevalent. Teak forests and other hard woods are found below 900 meters. Above 900 meters, there are many oak and pine trees. Teak, pines, canes, resin and turpentine are important forest products. Since electricity is not available in most villages, people depend on the wood for cooking.<sup>84</sup>

The main mode of transportation in Chin State is cars, however, the roads are poor as they are cut along the sides of mountains valleys. It is very difficult to travel because of the landscape as well as landslides. Cars have to bring shovels and garden hoes to clear frequent landslides and stone cover. Given these challenges, Chin villagers normally travel by foot from village to village.

## **Background of Chin Culture**

Chin people have their own culture and religion through which they maintain their morality, social life, and history. Chin people believe in *Khawzing* (Nature). *Khawzing* is not worshipped, but is viewed as ruling over everything, including spirits. Traditionally, the best way fulfill the will of *Khawzing* is to get along with one's fellow human beings and to live in harmony with the rest of nature including animals. Shooting many wild animals and harvesting many crops is meaningful, because it is accepted as being favored by *Khawzing*. When Chin people shot a big wild animal and/or get a good harvest, Chin people hold a feast of celebration with the whole village and everyone shares the joy together.<sup>85</sup> Many kinds of Chin traditional music come from wood and bamboo instruments. Most Chin hand-made materials (i.e. baskets) are from bamboo.

## **Importance of Trees & Forests to Chin People**

Trees are extremely important for the vitality of life, especially for Chin people. There are many useful wild trees in Chin State. Houses, huts and animal pens are commonly built by using wood and bamboo. Pine trees are also used for building homes and building fires. Usually, 30 to 50 pine trees are needed for the building of

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<sup>84</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chin\\_state](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chin_state)

<sup>85</sup> Thesis by Joel Za Hlei Kap (see above), page 10.

one house. Also important, Chin people produce many kinds of medicine using local trees and animals.<sup>86</sup> Chin people commonly travel by on foot so trees are also important for providing shade and shelter for those who are in transit.<sup>87</sup> The Chin people's survival depends on their relationship with the earth: and therefore it also largely depends on the climate.

## **Medicine & Livelihood**

The trees and animals in Chin State produce natural medicines that provide for the health and well-being of the people. If an animal is killed for medicine, almost the whole animal will be used. Traditionally, Chin people have been able to maintain a healthy balance in their interaction with the local environment and survive very well. Mountain rice, wheat, maize, coffee, oranges, damson (one kind of palm tree), and apples are traditionally grown with a system of shifting cultivation. The Chin do not traditionally use any machinery in doing their agricultural work.<sup>88</sup>

Starting in around 1988, after a change in SPDC policy, natural resources were increasingly taken away and people could not survive as they had before. People had to start working jobs with the methods that they were told because it was not their land and that did have any investment in it. The SPDC's policies and land confiscation practices caused significant deforestation and environmental problems though methods including cutting firewood, fishing by chemical and dynamite, getting orchids to sell, hunting and cultivation. Today it is very difficult to get hard wood and big trees. Even they struggle with violently hard work, they can not become rich, only receiving meager daily wages.<sup>89</sup>

## **Deforestation in Chin State**

### **Chin State Before Deforestation**

Before 1990 Chin State was full of deep forests. There were evergreen forests everywhere; the state was beautiful. There were many kinds of beautiful flowers including rhododendrons, and various kinds of small and endangered animal species including tigers, deer etc. The Kaladan River flowed strongly and was beautiful. It flows from India to Chin State and through Rakhine State and has pine trees along the banks.

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<sup>86</sup> Interviews 1, 2, 6 and 8.

<sup>87</sup> Interview 11.

<sup>88</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>89</sup> Interviews 3, 11, and 20.

***"I can't describe how beautiful it was. If we defend the forest, we don't need to ever go to another beautiful country. This area is good for a tourist attraction. The forest produces many natural resources, and there is enough food from the land. The trees can make the people peaceful."*<sup>90</sup>**

Before deforestation, the climate was regular. 90 % of the land was full of trees in Chin State. In the new era, people log the evergreen forest and now there is drought. The rivers have narrowed and dried up, the weather is hotter. Nowadays there are grasses instead of trees.

## **Causes of Deforestation**

### **SPDC Activity**

The SPDC has very good laws for forestry, but has not followed them. When the people want to destroy the evergreen forest they pay money to the leader of the military or of the forestry unit, and then they can cut the trees. There is no need to go to an office or a court, a criminal can give money and there is an understanding.

SPDC civil servants are also poor; they do not get enough salary. SPDC and the Forestry Department were cooperating to log trees for furniture and house building wood for their own benefit without tax at the border of Chin State and Kalay Town (Sagaing division). The junta orders the SPDC civil servants to allow logging as a way of paying their salaries.



*Logging at the border of Chin State and Sagaing Division.  
(Photo by Icon).*

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<sup>90</sup> Interview 12.

In the summer the SPDC brings wood by 12 trucks every day for 4 months. Before the trucks come, elephants carry the trees and they make trips 3 times in a day. In 1 trip they can bring 8 tons of wood. They send wood from inside Burma to India and China. Since 1088, people have not known how much the wood is being sold for. It does not produce benefits for local people. When a civil servant cuts one tree, he gets 3,000 kyat from the SPDC.

The SPDC has claimed that the condition of forests was as follows:

#	Forest Resources		Production 2001	strength 2002	Collected Taxes (kyat) 2006/2007	Collected Taxes (kyat) 2007/2008
1.	Teak	Tons	13,262	11,500	45,000	22,500
2.	Hardwood	Tons	13,410	12,613	15,000	3,750
3.	Bamboo	Tons	8,593,000	8,848,000	432,000	92,250
4.	Fire Wood	Tons	614,717	259,849	150,000	120,000
5.	Coal	Tons	440	432	60,000	45,000

Even though the government has given their exact production statistics, no one denies that forests are destroyed and exploited beyond what this statistic shows. Trees are cut down for export, for firewood and coal, for building houses, baking bricks, corn fields, and for the families. These are all contributing factors leading to deforestation.<sup>91</sup>

There are three sources of electric power in northern Chin State. Namely: 1. Tongva hydro-electricity, Hakha, 2. Var and laiva hydro-electricity, Falam and 3. Zaluyi hydro-electricity, Tedim. However, none of this electricity has reached the rural areas. Around 78.44% of Chin State's population is rural,<sup>92</sup> many pine trees are used for light and thousands of pine trees have been lost and destroyed. There is no fuel except firewood; this is a significant cause of deforestation in Chin State.

The SPDC is a dictatorship and the local people cannot complain and cannot do anything without an order from the government.<sup>93</sup> The government is focused on making money at any cost. If people request a logging permit and pay a high tax, they can destroy any forest. The village head cannot punish them because they will say, "we got the permit from the SPDC."<sup>94</sup> Even those who are responsible for taking care of the forests will accept bribes and allow logging. After paying money, the tree cutters can continue their job.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>91</sup> 'Ecological Crisis in Chin Land,' document from a file with the author (Jason), page 17.

<sup>92</sup> Chin State Solidarity and Development Union Record, 2005.

<sup>93</sup> Interview 5.

<sup>94</sup> Interview 7.

<sup>95</sup> Interview 8.

***“The SPDC civil leaders are very nice because we can order their underlings and we can do whatever job we like, when we are free.”<sup>96</sup>***

The SPDC has cut down many trees to make it easy for them to be able to see their enemy. Before the SPDC set up its camps, the local people enjoyed the forest and would pray or have picnics on the mountain. The SPDC set up a military station around the mountain for ‘security’, but actually it is not for security at all. The SPDC threatens and tortures people and now people cannot go to the mountain.<sup>97</sup>

## **Shifting Cultivation**

Chin people cultivate 194,309 acres each year (The table of Division ground, 24 January 2006). One out of every three acres has gone to cultivation.<sup>98</sup> As the major occupation is agriculture, people are growing various kinds of crops by the system of shifting cultivation with mattocks, and do not use any other machines.

The system of shifting cultivation is also called slash and burn cultivation. At first people cut the trees in October or November, this is called *Vah Hau* in Chin. The trees are burned two times in February or March the following year. The dark smoke covers the whole of the Chin Hills every year from February until early May. Nevertheless, the Chin community does not recognize the danger of air pollution because they lack scientific knowledge.<sup>99</sup> They plant crops for three days after the burn. But they have to wait for the first rain. At the beginning of March it regularly rains for the first time. The harvest time depends on the climate, if the rain is regular, they can harvest three months later. How the Chin use the field during the year depends on the land. They have to change the land every one to three years because the fallow field was destroyed.<sup>100</sup>

When people burn the forest for cultivation, it always over burns and destroys the forest and not only the focus area. Therefore, the wild animals and flowers are also lost. Burning is one of the reasons the forest is destroyed. Despite that this continues happen on a wide scale, the present government has no records of deforestation in the Chin Land.

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<sup>96</sup> Interview 10.

<sup>97</sup> Interview 20.

<sup>98</sup> Thin Thang Journal Vol.1 (Community Development Initiative), November 2006, page 3.

<sup>99</sup> Thesis, Joel Za Hlei Kap (see above), pages 21-23.

<sup>100</sup> Interviews 3, 6, 11, and 13.

## Firewood Cutting

After 1995 the good trees disappeared more and more because of the need for firewood. Yearly, the Chin were cutting at least 14,828,200 of trees (around 500,000 tons). The firewood is used in the kitchen because there is no electricity or other fuel. Almost every Chin family has to use firewood for cooking and for warmth and light.<sup>101</sup>

Most people cut down trees and divide them for the ease of bringing the trees down from the mountain area. They also send the wood from the mountain to the plains by bicycle or car. Every family uses three tons of wood every year. One ton is equal to 200 trees.

Villagers pay 1,000 kyat to the forestry office for one year of tree use. If they want to get more, they pay more. Around 300 tons of trees are deforested per village per year. The private companies are cutting the trees by group; there are 100 groups of



*Gathering firewood on roadside in Hakha Town. (Photo by Icon).*

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<sup>101</sup> Interviews 11 and 14.

businesses cutting yearly. They each have to pay a tax of 3,000 kyat to the leader of the military in the village; 5,000 kyat to the leader of forestry; and also 5,000 kyat to the town's forestry office. In addition, they force the logger to put their wood as they want in 3 or 4 sections. The cost of one section is equal to 1,500 kyat.

Business people bring trees by car or bullock cart and sell them at their village and in town. They can bring 12 tons per trip by car in a week. One ton of firewood costs 35,000 to 40,000 kyat. Each group can bring three tons of firewood in a day.



*Every family keeps firewood at their houses. (Photo by Icon).*

The foresters do not give permits to log good trees, because they have their own purpose for them, but some people log them anyway. If forestry officials catch the loggers, they collect 5,000 kyat for one piece of timber. As a result, all of the local mountains have become barren, contributing to flooding during monsoon rains.

Loggers cut the trees between December and March. In the rainy season they cannot cut because it is too difficult to go into the mountains, and in the summer, they cannot use water because it is all dried up. People cut trees that are 12 or more years old. One of the problems is they do not have enough trucks, and they do not have enough money to rent trucks. The rental fee is expensive at 300,000 kyat for one time. Truck owners benefit the most; the forestry leaders benefit second most, and loggers struggle to benefit.

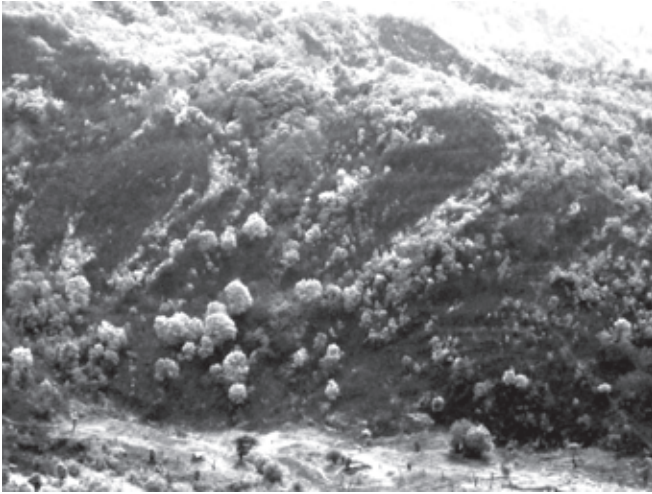
Businessmen can log hardwood after paying a tax. They are not allowed to log green timber and plank, because forestry officials need it for their own benefit. If a logger breaks the rules and is caught they used to be put into jail for seven years; now it is more, because officials want additional money.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Interviews 11 and 14.

## Burning the Forest

***"Before burning forest you must request a permit from the village head or relevant person. Then you must clear an area at least 10 feet wide of grass and shrubs to contain the fire."***<sup>103</sup>



*Burnt hill between Falm and Hakha towns. (Photo by Icon).*

In the past, there were various kinds of wild animals including tigers in the Chin Hills. The Burmese military burned the forest to get wild animals into the areas of their battalions. While the forest was burning, animals escaped and the military shot them with their guns.

Before 1995, local people could hunt on the mountains with their guns. After the government acquired guns, in 1988, the

local people were no longer allowed to hunt with their guns. The local people had to explain to the government that the guns were not for shooting humans and eventually the government gave permits for gun use to the Chin people. The Chin guns have licenses. A Chin gun is different than others; it weighs more than 2 kilos.

Around 1995, the forest was very healthy; a senior hunter could get all kinds of wild animals including tigers. Many people hunted animals by burning the forests until they started to lose their lives. People were caught in fires and killed while trying to catch animals.

Hunting is a part of Chin culture; almost all Chin men traditionally hunted animals, but did not sell the meat. When they got wild animals they held feasts and hosted social gatherings. It was an important part of people seeing their families and talking. In 1980, the animal prices went up. Nowadays many Chin people hunt animals for their profession. After hunting became a business, the animals quickly started to disappear.

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<sup>103</sup> Chin State law (1964) Section 2, Number 4.

Wild flowers and some species of small and endangered animals were lost by burning the forests. In addition, the people cannot grow any crops when the forest is burned. According to interviews for this paper, some people have killed and sold from anywhere between 60 to as many as 1,000 animals. One barking deer is more than 30,000 kyat; one deer is 300,000 kyat right now.<sup>104</sup>

## Cultivation of Tea & Castor

The government forced people to plant tea and castor in 1998. There was no plan for this project; they just forced people to plant in almost the whole of Chin State. Every village had to plant 20 acres and 10 villages combined to plant in one place. There are still tea and castor plantations in the Chin Hills but crops do not grow well. Out of 1,000 acres, only 100 can be harvested.<sup>105</sup>

Tea needs a lot of water and the government has not invested in caring for the trees. There is drought and therefore this project cannot develop and does not bode well for Chin people's livelihoods. This project has destroyed the forest more because people have had to cut it down to plant tea trees. In addition, businessmen take advantage of the project and request permits to plant many acres of tea. However, when they get the permits they destroy the forests and plant other crops that they want for their business.<sup>106</sup>

After the SPDC ordered people to plant the tea and castor, local people did not want to cultivate any other crops. The Forestry Ministry forces people to plant according to their projects. Every family paid 1,500 kyat for one bag of tea seed. In addition, every family paid a tax of more than 24,300 kyat for one year to the forestry office. The SPDC said, 'Chin State must be a tea state' and 'the plantation of castor is the obligation of men.' This project aimed to enable the SPDC to trade tea and castor to other countries, but they have not been successful yet.<sup>107</sup>



*A castor field in Chin State planted by force for the SPDC.  
(Photo by Icon).*

<sup>104</sup> Interviews 16 and 19.

<sup>105</sup> Interviews 17 and 19.

<sup>106</sup> Interviews 7, 15, and 20.

<sup>107</sup> Interviews 11 and 15.

In the past year the SPDC has ordered villagers to plant castor oil on their land. If people deny that order, they have to relocate by warrant of the SPDC. In addition, the Burmese military authorities have warned people that they would award the death sentence to anyone who speaks about the drawbacks of castor plantations in Chin State.<sup>108</sup>

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 17, we can see that 'Everyone has the right to own property'.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, the right of all peoples to enjoy their inherent freedom and to enjoy natural wealth and resources is expressed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 47. The SPDC does not follow these conventions in Chin State.

Every Chin person has to work as forced labor for this project at least three times a week. SPDC civil servants do not attend their office due to this project.

***"We are lying to each other because we knew that castor cannot grow well in Chin State. So we are working only by name."***<sup>110</sup>

Castor cultivation destroys the land by its oil. After it is planted, people cannot grow any crops and the land becomes barren land. Traditional Chin lands will more disappear because of the castor plantations.

## **Economic Crisis & Poverty**

95% of Chins are in poverty and because of poverty they commit corruption and injustice. Before 1988, every villager could survive by their own means. Between 1984 and 1987, a student could attend theology school at the expense of 80 kyat for one month. After a change in SPDC policy, natural resources have been taken away and everything costs more than before, so local people cannot survive very well and poverty is worse. The people have had to start working jobs which provide capital.<sup>111</sup>

Private business began logging a lot of trees for their livelihood. The trees are sold in their villages and in the plains. They have to pay a lot of tax to the forestry ministry and the military.

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<sup>108</sup> Khonumthung News, 12 July 2006, via Burma Net News, 26 July 2006.

<sup>109</sup> <http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm>

<sup>110</sup> Interviews 17 and 20.

<sup>111</sup> Interview 1.

## **Salary**

The staff or officers get a salary of around 20,000 kyat per month. They do not get sufficient money, so they have to work at other jobs.<sup>112</sup> A senior carpenter gets 4,500 kyat in a day; this is a good salary. Other junior people get 800 kyat per day. A worker who is an expert can get 1,500 kyat. However, most people cannot find work. Many youths and fathers are living jobless. The result of this poverty is cheating, exploiting, and robbing each other.

The cost of meat is more than 5,500 kyat for a viss (one viss is equal to 1.6 kilograms), so people cannot treat their visitors to dinner. One rice sack is 45,000 kyat. Also, it is at least 4,500 kyat for a piece of cloth. Therefore, it is very difficult for local people, especially for big families, to survive. People hunt animals, burn the forest to cultivate it, and find orchids to get money. People are in a crisis of livelihood. People are working hard and still cannot get enough food. Hard labor threatens old people because they have to work until they die. The worst aspect of this system is that people have no awareness and therefore cannot be liberated from the structure of poverty.

## **Raising Cattle Causes Deforestation**

Most local people breed cattle. Some families breed 100 bullocks. Around 10,000 bullocks are raised in Falam Town. Cattle-raising has happened since the era of people's grandfathers, but the people do not know how to raise cattle properly. The bullocks can destroy the forest due to their grazing. When the villagers need to move their fields, the land is already destroyed and they cannot cultivate it again. When people need money they do not care what their action will do to the land. They do not understand the long-term importance of the trees.

## **Deforestation & Orchids**

Orchids grow on the old trees and they like deep forests. Various kinds of orchids grow in Chin State. Orchids are good for some kinds of medicine which the Chinese make. The Chinese people get permission from the SPDC then they contact the private businesses of Burmese people. Many villagers find orchids in the deep forests on the mountain. Around 1,000 people find orchids every day. This started around 1990. There is a very exact process, step-by-step: villager to

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<sup>112</sup> Interview 10.



*Orchid growing on a tree. (Photo by Icon).*

private business, business to China. The orchids have different costs; some kinds are 3,000, 5,000 or 15,000 kyat for one viss.<sup>113</sup> One person finds 16 to 32 kilograms of orchids a day. A hundred thousand viss (16,000 kilograms) of orchids are sold every year.

Foresters collect taxes from people who gather orchids. Gatherers pay 5,000 kyat and then can sell the orchids. Some foresters go to markets to collect money. People collect the orchids between November and May.<sup>114</sup>

100 year-old trees are cut down to get orchids. They do this because the orchids are growing on the upper part of the trees. Various kinds of wild animals and wild flowers are disappearing with the orchids. Nowadays grasslands are replacing the forests.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Interviews 2, 5, 7, and most others.

<sup>114</sup> Most interviews.

<sup>115</sup> Interviews 6 and 7.

## Environmental Problems

### Destroyed Forest & Land

After burning the forest, the land is unusable for the next 15 years. During those 15 years, 3 million acres could have been cultivated.<sup>116</sup> Chin State is mountainous. Deforestation has resulted in tons of topsoil being eroded. Soil erosion results in a poor harvest. People need to buy food from the plains area due to the poor harvest, which further results in the loss of money. Many people move to the plains or other countries to search for better and more convenient places to live.<sup>117</sup>

The land is not good for cultivation because of the erosion. The rich people use pesticides and organic chemicals. They are helpful in the short term, but the next time the land is used it has become worse and unhealthy. Land can only be cultivated for one additional year before moving to another place.

The land in Chin State was destroyed by 1990. The climate and the earth were changed due to deforestation. When people cut down the evergreen forest, it cannot grow again by itself because it is different from other trees. Today, trees are growing around twenty miles away from the village. In rural areas people have no assurance of food for their lives, so many people have left their villages and run to where they can get enough food to live.



*Falam forest ruined. (Photo by Icon).*

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<sup>116</sup> Thing Thang Journal, page 3.

<sup>117</sup> Interview 11.

## Lost Species of Small Animals

Between 1970 and 1990 there were all kinds of animals living in Chin State, including tigers, deer, barking deer, fox, rabid dog, big monkey, gibbon, apes, boar, weasels, wolves, jacks, leopards, rhinos, and elephants. The hornbill is one of the Chin symbols for culture; it shows honesty and loyalty. Nowadays it is extinct. 70% of birds are now extinct in Chin State.

People could hunt various wild animals in most forests of Chin State before. Most hunters got animals and at least 200 animals' skins were sold each month. Those skins were sold to Mandalay and then were exported to China by businessmen.

After 1990 hunters could not get animals because the forest was thin and destroyed by logging and burning. Most of the wild animals were lost due to deforestation. When the trees grew without fruits, the animals also faced a lack of food and they could not breed for their next generation. In addition, they did have not enough places to live, so they moved to the thick forests. Especially when the animals' market prices went up, the wild animals decreased in number quickly.

***"When I was 18 years old, I started to hunt. I heard the voices of different kinds of animals from my house; I went one furlong away from the house. I got more than three wild animals with my gun during a short time. I didn't know how big the jungle or forest was because there was no need to go so far. Most of wild animals were near my home. I got 144 wild animals. After 1990, we lost a lot of species because of burning and cutting. They don't have enough places."**<sup>118</sup>*

## Pollution from Burning

There is no scientific equipment to test pollution in Chin State. But people can see the ashes from burning forest without a microscope. The people catch colds and sneeze often during the two months when they burn the forests until their lungs turn black.

## Deforestation & Water

Today, many springs in the Chin Hills do not produce fresh water anymore. The waste from deforestation is flowing into the river and the fish eat the pollution. It produces negative effects in humans also. Brooks, streams, and rivers are dried up and evaporating rapidly due to deforestation. Air pollution is often a serious problem in large cities.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Interviews 5 and 16.

<sup>119</sup> 'Ecological Crisis in Chin Land', document from a file with author, page 16. (He finished a Masters of Geography).