

Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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Land, Life and Livelihood

The road to the village of Kyekyeweri cuts a line between the past and the future, a line that scars the land and the lives of the people who called Kyekyeweri home. On one side of the road, the edge of an open pit mine mars the horizon, clouds of dust rising from heavy machinery digging the earth below. On the other side of the road lie the charred remains of Kyekyeweri, once a village of several hundred people who, like their parents and grandparents before them, farmed the fertile lands of these hills of the Tarkwa region in southwest Ghana.

Inter Pares staff visited Kyekyeweri last March with our counterpart, Third World Network Africa, which is supporting the struggles of many communities affected by mining in the region. The story of Kyekyeweri is a story that has been repeated in other regions of Ghana, and in countless places around the world. It is a story of the expropriation of wealth and disenfranchisement of local people from their own resources.

Multinational mining corporations – some of which are Canadian – are also interested in the Tarkwa region. But they are not interested in the history of the villages, or in the future of the people. Rather, their interest lies with the gold that is buried under the maize fields, the forests and rivers. To extract that gold, they have expropriated the land of local farmers, providing meagre compensation for lost homes and crops. They have deprived women and men of their historic land rights and livelihoods. And in the village of Kyekyeweri, with the assistance of the national police, they burned the village to the ground, beating and injuring several people in the process. Now homeless, people are



Yao Graham and Thomas Akabzaa of Third World Network Africa presenting findings on the impact of mining in the Tarkwa region of Ghana to an international conference on mining and social conflict in Africa.

still living in the remains of the village, sleeping under the trees, resisting relocation in the hope of getting adequate compensation for their crops and land.

Mining for gold is not new in Ghana. For centuries, local miners extracted gold to be made into currency and jewelry, for trade and for local use. These small-scale operations co-existed with other local economic activity including agriculture and forestry. Today, small-scale miners have been replaced by giant multinational companies from far-away places such as Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada.

In Africa, as in many other parts of the world, the colonial era imposed systems of plunder in which local resources – as well as human beings – were extracted to increase the wealth of the colonizers. The end of the colonial period held the promise that new sovereign states could put an end to exploitation and create

national economies that would ensure the well-being of all.

However, the history of the past fifty years of “development” has not delivered on that promise. Through economic and social policies imposed by international donors and financial institutions, the governments of former colonies have been weakened and pressured to make their economies ever more appealing to foreign investors. The economic order that has emerged looks very much like the previous one. Indeed, Third World Network has called the current era a period of “re-colonization.”

But this historical process is not inevitable. As in the colonial period, people in villages and towns around the world are organizing to defend their resources, their rivers, forests, and agricultural lands upon which their livelihoods depend. This *Bulletin* provides some examples of how Inter Pares and our counterparts are supporting their efforts.

Defending the Land

Indigenous communities in the southern-most islands of the Philippines are accessible only by *habal-habal* (passenger motorcycle) or by foot. The region is characterized by rolling hills and mountains, planted with rice and corn during growing seasons. There may be several chapels in a village, and perhaps a tribal hall, but rarely a school or health center.

Mindanao is the largest of these southern islands, and is rich in natural resources. It is also rich in the diversity of its people. The Lumads, who are indigenous peoples; the Moros, who are also native to the area but have adopted Islam; and the Christian settlers who migrated from other parts of the country in search of land and livelihood, are the main groupings that form the “tri-people” of Mindanao. While the concept of property is different among the three, many “tri-people” have united in their common struggles for land, justice, democracy and self-determination.

Asserting their rights to ancestral domain is central to the struggle of Lumad and Moro communities, whose history is one of resistance to centuries of colonization and oppression, by Spain, the United States, and Japan. National and multinational mining and logging companies have further oppressed and displaced indigenous peoples. The 1995 Mining Act passed by the Philippine government made it easier for foreign companies to control and exploit vast tracts of land and, despite a ban on logging, corporations continue to strip the forests for lumber. Generations of struggle by Lumad and Moro people for self-determination and autonomy have been met with brutal repression by successive Philippine government administrations anxious to control the resource-rich land, and Mindanao remains a heavily militarized area.

Inter Pares’ counterpart, the Tri-People Concern for Peace,

Salween: River of Life

The majestic Salween River is free-flowing, wild and immense. It originates in the Tibetan plateau and winds its way through Burma to the Andaman Sea. The river’s ecosystem brims with life: aquatic plants, rare species of fish, tangled forests, and people who have depended upon the river’s fertility for generations. The Salween nourishes its human neighbours by providing fishing grounds, clean water, and by helping to regulate the region’s water cycle. For many, this river is linked not only to their livelihoods but is central to their cultural identity.

The energy of the Salween is also now seen as a resource available to be exploited through the construction of hydroelectric dams.

Since 1988, the year of its brutal repression of pro-democracy advocates, the Burmese military junta has built over 100 dams. Its next target is the Salween River. With the help of Japanese and Thai funding, the first phase of the Ta Sang Dam, located along the Salween River in Shan State has already begun. Hundreds of thousands of people

have been forcibly relocated from the banks of the Salween and its tributaries with no compensation. If the dam is completed, they will never return home. To date, at least 100,000 Shan and other ethnic minorities have fled into Thailand where they are not officially acknowledged as refugees, and thus receive no support from the authorities.



Progress and Development (Tricom), was established to assist Lumad and Moro communities in Mindanao and surrounding islands to regain control of their territories, to manage their own economic, political and cultural development, and to promote collaboration among the tri-people. Through education on the Indigenous People’s Rights Act, research on indigenous knowledge and practices, lineage and territorial boundaries, Tricom supports Lumad and Moro communities in preparing and filing land claims. Tricom offers training in appropriate agricultural technologies and is exploring, with tribal communities, programs for reforestation, watershed management, nursery and seed production.

Tricom is also developing integrated programs to enhance women’s skills and income, and to promote recognition of women’s essential roles in production and in society. Tricom is facilitating education in health care and sanitation, and some mothers have been trained to help address the early childhood education needs of children in these remote areas.

Tricom has built relationships of trust and respect with these communities, and is supporting the united efforts of the tri-people for peace and justice. Tricom is committed to accompanying their struggle to defend their rights, and for meaningful development, managed and controlled by indigenous peoples themselves.

It has been documented that those who refuse to leave are killed by the military. Protecting both the dam and accompanying power transmission lines will become justification for a larger army presence and the increasing militarization of Shan state.

Burma is notorious for its policy of forced labour, recently condemned by the International Labour Organization. Men and women, young and old, are forced to work on large



Credit: Philip Gain

infrastructure projects, including pipelines, railroads, hotels and tourist attractions. The climate is one of fear and brutality. Rapes and beatings are commonplace. Human rights groups fear the Ta Sang Dam will be no exception.

Salween Watch, a coalition of groups supported by Inter Pares, monitors the Burmese dictatorship's activities on the Salween River. Since 1998, Salween Watch has brought together a number of local Thai environmental groups and international NGOs to share information and strategize with members of various Shan organizations about the effects of dams. Salween Watch has called for a moratorium on all hydroelectric development until democracy is restored to Burma.

Reckless degradation of the air, water and land affects the natural world, and the people who have shaped their lives in accordance with it. Violations of the environment and violations of human rights are inextricably linked. Healthy societies require healthy environments; groups like Salween Watch are working to ensure that a future democratic Burma will be built on a solid and ecologically sustainable foundation.

economic development. When they resist, they are slaughtered, as in Colombia or Brazil, as in Nigeria or Liberia, or Burma.

When people move “voluntarily”, escaping the ravages of progress in their own region and seeking a future for their children in burgeoning urban areas, they often live in slums eking out a living with no rights or protection. And when they try to cross borders to find opportunities in the new global economy, they experience the vulnerability of invisible and stateless people, valued by a grasping world merely as a few years of illegal cheap labour. They are exploited, repressed, and often killed on the road to a dream that is out of reach for all but a few who slip through the cordon.

In this process, the trade and traffic in human beings has become one of the largest and most profitable illicit commercial ventures in the world, rivalling even narcotics in volume and scale. This trade is dominated by the trafficking of human beings as indentured labourers, often in hazardous and illegal conditions without a modicum of protection, forever indebted to the traffickers and their “employers”. In its most extreme form, trafficking includes outright slavery, including sexual slavery, which entraps hundreds of thousands of young women and children annually in every country on every continent, Canada being no exception.

In places as diverse as Mexico and Colombia, the Thai-Burma border and the Philippines, Inter Pares is supporting organizations to document the experience of refugees, displaced people and migrants, and to defend and protect the rights of people uprooted by violence and economic exploitation. At the global level, Inter Pares works through the Geneva-based Migrant Rights International and the December 18 Network on Migrants Rights, supporting their joint effort to promote the incorporation of migrant workers' rights in international human rights conventions and the laws and norms of all nations.

Only when governments finally begin, as a first priority, to acknowledge and protect the lives and livelihoods of people in their own communities, and the human rights of those who venture from these communities seeking new opportunity, can we truly say that globalization serves all of humankind, and the future that we share.

People Are Not A Resource

When we talk about exploitative resource extraction, we usually think of mines or oil wells, about clear-cutting timber or scouring the seas for fish. We think of clearing land for the cultivation of commodity crops like wheat, or beef — or roses — and land-based fish-farming. Rarely do we consider the most wanton and cruel exploitation — that of human beings.

One of the most perverse notions of the modern world is the idea that people are a “resource” or “capital”. Too often human beings are reduced to economic units — valued, exploited and discarded on the basis of their usefulness to economic growth and “efficient” production

of commodities and wealth. In this economic equation, people are “mined” as deliberately as oil or gold, and often with much less care, and little regulation.

People rarely are protected in the same way that environmental protection has begun to be regulated. And people often are seen as expendable in ways that most of us now would never conceive of considering the mountains, forests and plains that they inhabit. People are uprooted to build dams, they are driven out of entire regions to make way for roads or mines or pipelines or factories or export crops. They are moved to provide labour — often forced labour, including slavery itself — for the relentless project of

Canada and Militarized Commerce

As Canadians, we like to think of ourselves as a humane people, acting in the world in defence of democratic values and human rights. Indeed, Canadians have a long and honourable tradition in peacekeeping, and in providing aid to some of the poorest countries.

But Canadians are beginning to recognize that there is a darker side to Canada's role in the world. As the Canadian private sector increasingly participates in the global economy, there is clear evidence that respect for basic human rights has been displaced in the single-minded pursuit of profit. And there is apparently little that the Canadian government is able, or willing, to do when corporations are involved in violations of human rights committed as part of wealth extraction activities.

The role of Calgary-based Talisman Energy in the Sudan has been widely reported. Talisman and its shareholders are earning enormous profits from their oil interests in the Sudan, in the midst of a war in which two million people have died and four million have been displaced. Oil revenues ensure that the Sudanese government can continue to buy weapons, tanks, gunships and bombers. Senior leaders of several Canadian churches visited southern Sudan in April 2001 and concluded that "oil development has killed and displaced untold numbers of people, forcing them to flee their homes and land for an uncertain future". Bishop Macram Max Gassis, a Sudanese Catholic leader, said that oil companies like Talisman "are as much killers as the government of Sudan."

Despite international condemnation, Talisman has so far refused to leave Sudan. They have argued that their presence is actually helpful to local people, although the evidence is overwhelmingly to the contrary.

In Burma, another country in chaos, Canadian companies have

joined the eager scramble to respond to the military dictatorship's invitation to foreign investors. The Burmese junta can guarantee a compliant workforce and a subdued population, after the movement for democracy was crushed when the military slaughtered thousands of civilians during peaceful protests in 1988. Among the largest Canadian investors is Ivanhoe Mines. There are at least seven other Canadian companies involved in resource extraction. A Canadian helicopter corporation was involved in the infamous Yadana gas pipeline, constructed with the use of forced labour. As the economy of Burma is almost completely controlled by the military, foreign investment is directly complicit in keeping the military equipped and in power.

In 1997, the government of Canada imposed limited trade sanctions against the Burmese regime. Unlike the US position, this did not include sanctions against investments. In the first quarter of 2000, Canada was the second largest source of foreign investment in Burma. Canadian trade sanctions have proved to be so ineffectual that Canadian imports from Burma have actually doubled since 1997.

While Canadian involvement in the Sudan and Burma may be among the worst recent instances of corporate complicity, there are many other examples. In Orissa, India, three villagers were killed in protests against another Canadian mining company. In war-torn Colombia, Canadian oil and mining companies are actively involved in resource extraction and Canadian helicopters sold to the US government are now engaged in US-sponsored counter-insurgency operations.

Most Canadians find it reprehensible that Canadian-based companies are reaping profit from misery and suffering. Even more shocking is that, in some cases, Canadian taxpayers are



Credit: Jean Soulard

underwriting the international activities of Canadian corporations through a variety of subsidy programs.

The Government of Canada urgently needs to develop the legislative tools to regulate and, if necessary, to curtail the activities of Canadian companies that result in human rights violations or destroy people's livelihoods and environments. Among the actions that the government can take is amending the Special Economic Measures Act, and developing tax disincentives for Canadian companies engaged in militarized commerce.

Canadians need to become more aware of these problems. Canadian consumers need to be conscious of the source country of the products they purchase. Canadian investors need to be aware of what their investments support. At a minimum, the Canadian private sector must adhere to universal standards of human rights and environmental protection. When the private sector is unable to police itself, then the Canadian government, on behalf of all Canadians, must act.

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