

Burmese military cracks down on copper mine protest

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In the early hours of last Thursday, the military-backed government of President Thein Sein sent armed police to disperse six small camps of protesters occupying sites around a copper mine at Letpadaung, near the town of Monywa in northwestern Burma.

During the 3 a.m. raids, police used water cannon and tear gas to forcibly remove the protesters. About 30 people received serious burns after flares used to light up the area set fire to the makeshift accommodation at the camps. About 1,000 people, including 300 Buddhist monks, were involved, although many had left after the government issued an ultimatum on Tuesday to end the protest.

The \$US1 billion mining project covers some 3,184 hectares. It is currently jointly-owned by one of the Burmese military's two main conglomerates, the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd, and the Wanbao mining company, a subsidiary of the Chinese arms manufacturer Norinco.

The protest began in August over what protesters allege is the illegal confiscation of land. The camp sites, set up on November 18, brought mine operations to a halt. The demolition of a local Buddhist monastery to make way for the mine's expansion had also caused resentment, along with environmental and health concerns. Opposition activists and non-government organisations (NGOs) supported the protest.

The crackdown demonstrates that the military still holds the reins of power, behind the façade of a civilian government. On Friday, a group of NGOs noted that six organisers of a protest in Rangoon in support of the Letpadaung occupation had been charged under section

505(b) of the criminal code for committing or inducing others "to commit an offence against the state or against the public tranquillity." The military junta often used this law to deal with opponents of its rule.

The grievances of people involved in the Letpadaung protest are similar to those raised against the massive Chinese-funded Myitsone Dam hydro-electric project. The government suspended the dam in September 2011, not primarily to appease angry locals, but to send a signal to the US and its allies that it was looking to move away from China and toward the West. The Obama administration, which been encouraging such a shift, responded with a series of official visits, culminating in last month's trip by the US president.

In the case of the Myitsone Dam, sections of the military junta had become alarmed at the over-dependence of the economy on Chinese investment in energy and infrastructure projects. They regarded as vital the lifting of Western sanctions imposed after the military crackdown on political opposition in 1988.

This time, the regime responded differently. Defence Minister Lieutenant General Wai Lwin warned that stopping the Letpadaung mine expansion would damage foreign investment in Burma. "We are facing protests that could hamper development," he said. Government ministers warned against offending China and foreign investors in general.

While criticising last week's police action, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi stepped in to appease local anger. After meeting with management and protesters, she called on police to apologise for the use of force. On Saturday in Monywa, 100 police officers formally

apologised at a ceremony involving 10 Buddhist monks.

Echoing government comments, Suu Kyi said the military junta previously had made deals that were not in people's interests, but such agreements had to be followed "so the country's image will not be hurt." She added: "When dealing with people, I don't always follow what people like. I only tell the truth. I will work for the long term interest of the country."

President Thein Sein's office announced on Saturday that Suu Kyi would head a 30-member parliamentary commission to investigate the police crackdown at Letpadaung and assess the future of the project, including whether "to continue the copper mining project and whether to stop foreign investment."

Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) represent layers of the Burmese bourgeoisie whose economic interests have in the past been stymied by the military's economic and political dominance. The NLD has championed a turn to the West and the opening up of the country to foreign investment.

Now that the military has installed a "civilian" government to execute such a turn, Suu Kyi is collaborating closely with Thein Sein and his regime, providing it with much needed democratic window dressing. In April, Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders won seats in the military-dominated parliament through by-elections.

Concerned that the mine project could be adversely affected, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei defended the expansion plans. He said all questions of compensation, relocation and environmental protection has been worked out with Burmese officials, in accord with local laws and regulations.

China's state-owned *Global Times* accused "some Westerners and NGOs" of instigating the Letpadaung protests. Whether or not this is the case, the US could potentially use the issue to further undermine China's position in Burma. US State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland told the media on Friday the US was concerned about the role of the security forces and

called for "due process" to ensure the "right of the Burmese people to freely assemble."

Washington's concern is not the democratic rights of ordinary Burmese people, but ending China's close ties with Burma. Obama made his first overseas trip, since his re-election, to South East Asia, underscoring the high priority of his "pivot" to Asia. Closer ties between the US and Burma would upset China's plans to establish an economic corridor from the Indian Ocean to southern China as an alternative means of importing energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East.



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