

# Police and villagers clash in Burma over land dispute

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A violent clash between police and protesting farmers in Burma's (Myanmar) Irrawaddy Delta last month has again highlighted the sharp tensions in country's rural areas over land confiscation.

Some 300 villagers were protesting the confiscation without compensation of 400 hectares of land in Maubin township by the military junta in 1996. The land was then sold to a private company that bulldozed former rice paddies and built artificial fish breeding ponds.

The protest started at one of the fish ponds and continued for several days before local authorities declared a curfew. Police moved in to break up the demonstration on February 26 and a pitched battle ensued as villagers resisted. One police officer was killed and at least 40 police and farmers were injured.

The villagers were bitter that the flood plain, which they had reclaimed, had been handed to a private company and much of it had been neglected. The protesters had occupied some of the neglected land, had begun to prepare it for cultivation, and refused to leave when told to do so by police.

According to villagers, the fighting broke out when police assaulted several women. "Fifteen villagers, including five women, are in hospital. There is another woman who miscarried her pregnancy during the melee. And there are many people out there who were injured, some of whom are hiding in the forest," Ko Thura, a member of the Maubin NGO network, told the *Myanmar Times*.

Naing Win, a farmer, told AFP: "We didn't dare protest when the military government seized our land [in 1996] as we were frightened." He received wounds to his arm and back from rubber bullets. "I did not think they would shoot us," he said. "Although I got shot, I will continue until we get our land back."

The protest is just one of many that have taken place over land since direct military rule was replaced by the nominally civilian government of President Thein Sein in 2011. In making a turn to the US and its allies, the military has engaged in some "democratic" window dressing, including allowing the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) to stand in elections for the military-controlled parliament.

In rural areas, farmers have used the opportunity to voice grievances that in many cases go back years. Last November, police cracked down on protests against the development of a giant copper mine in northern Burma. The project is jointly owned by the Burmese military and Wanbao Mining, a subsidiary of China North Industries Corp. (See: "Burmese military cracks down on copper mine protest")

About 47 million of Burma's population of 60 million live in rural areas. Of these, about 30 percent are landless, while many others are heavily in debt to loan sharks who charge up to 10 percent interest a month. Prices for rice are low. Conditions for most farmers are appalling. Some 75 percent of homes in the country are not on the electricity grid.

Landlessness increased after Cyclone Nargis hit in 2008. More than 130,000 were killed and, without government assistance, many farmers left the land. According to a Reuters report last August, three million rural migrants are now working in factories and construction in Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia.

The Thein Sein regime promised to pay attention to rural areas, but its "reforms" have not assisted farmers and the rural poor. Rather the government is seeking to consolidate land laws to facilitate foreign and local investment—in the process opening the door to further land grabs.

The government's Farmland Law and the Vacant,

Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law were enacted in March 2012. The legislation is supposed to clarify land ownership under the constitution and provide legal protection for land owners. Instead it has created a system of land committees filled with government appointees that can rule on land disputes, impose fines, and enforce evictions.

The first act makes clear the state is the owner of all land, but allows farmers to cultivate the land in accord with government regulations. It also allows the government to expropriate land in the “national interest”. The second law has far reaching consequences as it allows the government to seize land not in use.

An *Asia Times* article entitled “Land grabbing as big business in Myanmar” commented: “The customary rights held by millions of agrarians, land labourers and contract farmers including shifting cultivators and pastoralists are also not recognised within the current legal framework. Without land tenure security, small landowners are particularly vulnerable to speculators and corporate agri-businesses.”

Reuters cited the case of a farmer who was forced to sell her family land to a company which wanted to use it for a palm tree plantation. The farm had been rotating crops in a system known as *taungya*, in which some land is regularly left fallow. The company claimed this was unused lands under the law. Thaug Tin said: “Now I have to work another people’s farms. I want my land back.”

Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has stepped in to assist the military-backed government to contain the mounting anger over land disputes. Last November Suu Kyi agreed to head a parliamentary committee to investigate the violent police attack on protesters at the Letpaduang copper mine that provoked widespread public outrage.

A report produced last month by Burmese lawyers and the US based Justice Trust found that as well as tear gas and water cannon, the police had used white phosphorus, which burns into the flesh, to disperse the Letpaduang demonstrators. It also found that police had rejected repeated requests by the protest groups to hold peaceful assemblies near the mine.

The official parliamentary report released this week acknowledged that the villagers had suffered “unnecessary burns”, but referred only to smoke

bombs, not white phosphorus. The report recommended that the mine proceed, attributing the protests to a “lack of transparency” and the payment of compensation “not at market value”.

Protest leader Thwe Thwe Win announced that the protests would resume, saying she was “very dissatisfied” and describing the report as “unacceptable”. “There is no clause that will punish anyone who had ordered the violent crackdown,” she said. Opposition leader Suu Kyi is planning to visit the area in a bid to pacify opponents of the mine.

No one should be surprised at Suu Kyi’s role as apologist for the military-backed government. She and her NLD represent the interests of sections of the Burmese bourgeoisie who sought to reorient the country to the US and to open the country up to Western investors. Now that the military has given the green light for this orientation, the opposition is collaborating closely in implementing its plans.

Suu Kyi has also provided the necessary “democratic” cover for the US and the European Union to reforge their ties with the Burmese regime, lift economic sanctions and open the country as a source of cheap labour and natural resources. The Obama administration is no more concerned about “human rights” in Burma than anywhere else in the world, including the United States. The US rapprochement with Burma is part of Obama’s “pivot to Asia” aimed at stemming Chinese influence in the region.



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