

Over 100 dead in Burmese landslide

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Local officials confirmed on Monday that the death toll from a landslide in Hpakant, a mining region in Kachin, the northern-most state of Burma (Myanmar), has reached at least 113. Over 100 more people are missing, and are thought to have perished.

The tragedy has underscored the deep-going poverty and social inequality in areas such as Kachin, and the unsafe conditions in the country's mining sector, which continues to be largely dominated by the military.

The victims of the disaster are reportedly impoverished migrant workers forced to scavenge for jade in open-pit mines located in the mountainous region. They lived in a make-shift camp, dubbed Plastic Village, in dwellings made of tarpaulin and scraps of metal, and fossicked through the tailings of one of the area's large mines,

Authorities appear to have given conflicting reports as to when the landslide occurred. Initially they said the disaster took place while numbers of workers were on the hill-side, collecting jade. They subsequently stated that the incident occurred at around 3 a.m. on Saturday, with mud engulfing the dwellings of sleeping miners.

Around 70 shelters were reportedly buried by the landslide, which sent a wall of mud as high as 20 feet. According to some reports, up to 200 people could be missing. While it is not clear what caused the disaster, landslides are common in the region. At least three landslides have occurred in Kachin this year, but the latest is the worst in recent years.

A local official, Nilar Myint, told Agence France Presse that authorities have been unable to identify most of the victims, because they were internal migrants. Authorities claim not to have any information on how many people lived in the encampment. Myint said very few survivors had been rescued. "We are only seeing dead bodies," she said.

Myint noted that anger was growing over the disaster, commenting: "It's not ending. It's still ongoing. Local

people in town are getting angry, because there are just too many bodies."

According to a community leader quoted in the *New York Times*, by Monday there were so many dead that there was no room in the Hpakant hospital morgue. Bodies were being transported directly to the cemetery. There are reportedly piles of unidentified dead bodies covered in tarpaulin.

Activists and commentators denounced the conditions that led to the tragedy, and pointed to the complicity of the authorities.

Paul Sein Twa, of the Burma Environmental Working Group, told Al Jazeera: "This could have been prevented if they were following the proper environmental management rules." Day Wei Thant Sin, founder of the Myanmar Green Network, commented: "There have been so many protests against these projects... The rules are very weak and the authorities don't take action at all. That's why all this is happening."

Kachin state has been the centre of a longstanding conflict between the country's military and the Kachin Independence Army. According to the United Nations Development Program, some 26 percent of the state's population lives below the country's austere poverty line. Almost 37 percent of infants in the region suffer from stunted growth, a symptom of malnutrition.

The region also reportedly has some of the highest rates of drug addiction in the country, with impoverished workers among the victims of the trafficking. The drug trade is reputed to be controlled by sections of the military and government authorities.

A report by Global Witness, a Western-backed NGO, in October found that the value of jade mined in 2014 was some \$31 billion, or the equivalent of almost half of Burma's gross domestic product. Virtually none of the profits from the sector finds its way into state coffers, or to the workers who mine the material.

Among those identified by the report as controlling large swathes of the industry are Than Shwe, the country's former military dictator, Maung Maung Thein, former general secretary of the country's previous ruling party, Union Solidarity and Development Party, and Ohn Mint, a minister in the outgoing government and a former top military general.

According to the report, the families of the three made pre-tax sales at the jade emporium, the government's official jade sale, of \$US220 million in 2014. They have been the beneficiaries of various state concessions and licensing arrangements.

Global Witness representative Juman Kubba noted: "Since 2011, a rebranded government has told the world it is turning the page on the ruthless military rule, cronyism and human rights abuses of the past. But jade—the country's most valuable natural resource and a gemstone synonymous with glitz and glamour—reveals a very different reality."

Al Jazeera reported that an unnamed senior member of the National League for Democracy (NLD), which won an overwhelming victory in this month's national elections, said NLD representatives have been told "not to talk out loud ... about these kinds of topics" until the formation of a new government.

The comments, and the ongoing dominance of the jade sector by military figures and government authorities, underscore the fraudulent character of claims that Burma is undergoing a "democratic transition." In reality, the country is only being promoted as an "emerging democracy" because it is being brought into the orbit of the US, and its campaign of diplomatically and militarily isolating China.

The NLD's stance indicates that little will change in the ruthless exploitation of miners for the lucrative jade trade under a government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The NLD represents sections of the Burmese capitalist class that were mostly sidelined by the military after it seized power in a 1962 coup. The NLD has advocated opening up the economy to foreign investment, along with a turn to Washington and its allies.

Over the past four years, the military-backed government has collaborated closely with the NLD in beginning to carry out pro-market restructuring, at the expense of the working class. Suu Kyi has used her Western-backed democratic credentials to help defuse protests, including one that erupted in 2012 against the

Letpadaung copper mine—a joint project between one of the military's conglomerates and a Chinese corporation (see: "Burmese military cracks down on copper mine protest").



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