

Myanmar mine landslide leaves 14 dead, 200 missing

By John Braddock
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A landslide at a jade mine in northern Myanmar (formerly Burma) last week killed at least 14 people, with hundreds more buried by the collapsed hillside. The landslide in Kachin state on the night of May 23 came after several days of heavy rainfall. One week after the tragedy there has been no official confirmation of the final numbers of dead and injured. As many as 200 workers remain missing.

According to the *Myanmar Times*, the disaster occurred around 8:15 p.m. at a site owned by Yadanar Star Company. The company had ceased operations for the day due to the bad weather, but hundreds of so-called hand pickers, who scour the excavation site for leftover jade deposits, moved in to work over the tailings. One witness said there was a creek flowing down the middle of the workings, displacing soil from the hill.

Administrators, police, a funeral service team, aid workers and the fire brigade worked with company backhoes to clear the slide until the search was called off due to heavy rain and the continuing threat of landslides.

U Kyaw Myint, a local resident, said: “We collected the dead and the injured from the top part of the slide. We could not retrieve bodies from the bottom of the slide. If we tried to remove them, the land from above would collapse again.” Hundreds of hand pickers were still working on the tailings the following day, despite continuing downpours.

In an attempt to divert attention away from the responsibility of Myanmar’s government, Hmawe Gyi, a member of the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) party, criticised the company for hampering the recovery operation. “Jade mine companies should use machinery and cooperate with authorities to search for the missing people,” he said. “Now, people don’t

know if their family members are dead or not.”

The remote region has little phone coverage and poor roads. The absence of these, underdevelopment and miserable and dangerous working conditions are not due to a lack of money. Jade is an expensive and sought-after gemstone. Hpakant, which lies 651 kilometres (404 miles) north of Myanmar’s capital Naypyidaw, is the site of the world’s biggest mine and produces some of the highest-quality jade. Much of it is exported or smuggled to China.

Global Witness reported last October that jade valued at a staggering \$US31 billion (£20 billion) was extracted from the mines in 2014. This sum, the *Guardian* noted, equated to nearly half the country’s gross domestic product and over 46 times current spending on health. The total jade output for the past decade was estimated at \$120 billion.

According to *Irrawaddy*, over 620 mining companies operate in the Hpakant and Lone Kin regions. An estimated 300,000 workers toil under conditions of terrible exploitation and extreme poverty. Enormous undocumented profits are seized by a small and corrupt elite, mostly hidden license holders linked to the Myanmar military.

All the main mining companies identified by Global Witness are either directly owned by army officers, or operated by those with close ties to them. Spokesman Mike Davis told the BBC: “These families are making extraordinary sums of money, often in the tens and hundreds of millions of dollars.” Companies connected to the family of retired general Than Shwe, the former military ruler, allegedly made more than \$220 million in jade sales in 2013 and 2014.

Between 1992 and 2011, Than Shwe presided over a military dictatorship that brutally suppressed demonstrations and strikes, and imprisoned opponents.

From 2009 the military junta opened up pro-market reforms by privatising assets and allowing the establishment of private banks. But it ensured that the state assets largely ended up in the hands of the military or its associates.

In the past year, dozens of mine workers have been maimed or killed picking through waste dumps. The worst disaster occurred last November when 113 miners were killed and 100 left missing when a 60-metre mountain of earth and waste collapsed, burying the makeshift huts where the miners slept. The activities of 12 companies were briefly suspended after the incident.

Another landslide hit the Hpakant area on December 25, leaving as many as 50 people missing. The exact death toll in this incident, as in many others, has remained undetermined. On January 25, mines run by the Yadana Yaung Chi, Yadana Adipati and Myitsone Ayeyar companies suffered two landslides, while 100 prospectors were looking for jade, killing at least 30. The deputy minister of mines, Than Tun Aung, responded with threats to prosecute the “illegal” miners, “large and small.”

On May 5, a slag heap at a mine run by Yadanar San Shwe Company and Triple One Company collapsed. Sai Nyunt Lwin of the Hpakant hospital said 13 bodies were brought in from Seng Tawng mining village. Aung Ram, who lost eight family members in the accident, said: “This happens all the time and now it has come to my relatives. We cannot do anything except to pray for their souls and we don’t even know who to blame.”

Civil rights groups routinely criticise the mining companies for the social and environmental impacts of the unregulated industry. Locals have led protests against the companies in recent months to try to pressure them to improve the safety of excavation areas. Early this month, civil society organisations in Kachin state demanded that the government form a commission to inspect mines that have violated industry regulations.

New safety measures have been promised, but the NLD and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi, which won last November’s election, are not about to cut across the interests of the military and its business empires. In the name of “national reconciliation,” a power-sharing arrangement has been agreed, ensuring that the

military’s position and privileges are protected.

While the NLD may stimulate business opportunities for entrepreneurs previously sidelined by the army, both factions of the ruling elite intend to accelerate the opening up of Myanmar to foreign capital, and bring the country’s foreign policy into line with Washington’s so-called pivot to Asia, directed against China. This means savage economic restructuring, cuts to public spending, privatisation of state assets and continuing deaths and exploitation in mining and other industries, as the NLD seeks to turn the country into a new cheap labour platform.

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