

More than 170 killed in accident at Myanmar jade mine

By Oscar Grenfell
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The death toll continues to rise from a tragic accident last Thursday at a jade mine in the Hpakant region of Kachin state in northern Myanmar. Authorities have confirmed more than 170 fatalities, but according to some reports the real number of those killed may stand at 200 or more.

The disaster is the worst in the history of Myanmar's multi-billion dollar jade industry. It has highlighted the perilous conditions confronting oppressed and super-exploited miners in the mostly unregulated sector, which provides large profits to sections of the country's military-dominated regime.

Survivors have recounted the terrifying scene they confronted when the accident occurred at the Wai Khar mine shortly after dawn on Thursday morning. They have said that the only warning of the impending catastrophe was a deep rumbling noise. Within seconds they were engulfed by an enormous wave of mud and water, as high as seven metres.

Without any chance of escape, those working in the pit were engulfed by the water. Many of the victims who perished drowned, while others appear to have been struck by debris. Unaccounted-for miners may have been buried beneath the mud.

The accident occurred following a month of heavy rain from seasonal monsoons. According to the *New York Times*, the mine pit was beneath a 300-metre slope topped with a mining run-off. The precipitation weakened the foundations of the mining waste, causing it to tumble into the pit below. One of the mine's walls collapsed. Water that had built up on the other side of it came flooding into the mine.

Rescuers faced the harrowing scene of dozens of bodies floating on what had become a vast lake at the former site of the mine.

As of yesterday, the official death toll stood at 172. Another 52 survivors received various injuries. Rescue

teams are continuing to work at the site, but this has essentially become a body-recovery operation.

Some 77 of those who perished were placed in a mass grave on Friday, amid fears that the large number of cadavers could result in the spread of disease. Another 40 workers were buried on Saturday, while only a minority have been cremated in line with Buddhist religious practices.

Relatives of those who died have spoken to the media about the difficult conditions of work and life that confronted the victims.

Aye Mon, a 30-year-old woman who lived near the mine, told *Al Jazeera* yesterday that she had been widowed by the accident, which killed her husband and her brother. She explained: "My husband had been working in the jade mining business for more than 10 years. But it was the first time for my brother. It was his second working day in the mine."

Her brother, who was just 22-years-old, had travelled more than 600 kilometres from his home village of Monywa to find work at the mine. "My husband and my brother were both buried yesterday. I have nothing to depend on in my life. All I have left is just my two-year-old daughter," Aye Mon said.

Another relative cited by *Al Jazeera*, Win Kyaw, explained that his 20-year-old son had lost his life. Kyaw, who is 42, had worked at mines in the area for more than 20 years. He said that over that time, he had worked in the dangerous conditions to find small stones that only yielded him \$10 to \$15 a piece.

Kyaw added: "My son got two big stones last year but a group of soldiers from the Myanmar army took them from him. If we find a big stone, they always come and ask for it."

The jade mining sector in the Hpakant region is shrouded in secrecy. A murky web of senior military generals, massive army-linked corporations, smaller

companies, middlemen, separatist rebel groups and wealthy buyers, the majority of them from China, are all involved.

Because of this, the identity of the individuals or groups that were profiting from the Wai Khar mine remains opaque. According to media reports, it was operated until last Tuesday by a consortium of five companies that had official permission to mine the site. If this is true, it means that the government allowed mining to continue in the days leading up to the tragedy, despite the monsoonal rains threatening the mountain of mine waste above the pit.

The companies and officials had supposedly shut the mine as the dangers grew on Tuesday, but miners continued to work.

The Kachin Independence Army, which has fought a separatist war for an independent state of the Kachin ethnic minority since 1961, is active in the area near the mine and is also alleged to finance its operations through the jade trade. Some commentators have suggested that it may have been involved in the continued operation of Wai Khar in the lead-up to the accident, but no hard evidence of this has been provided.

Many miners in the region function as impoverished contractors, working at different sites and earning a pittance from whatever they extract. Because of this, when mines are officially closed, they receive no entitlements and are forced to continue their search for jade regardless of the dangers. Most miners are internal immigrants living away from family networks of support.

Accidents are a common occurrence, especially during the monsoonal season. Because the sector is unregulated, the true number of fatalities is unknown, but is estimated at over 100 per year.

While most of the miners in the region, who number between an estimated 100,000 and 300,000, live in abject poverty, vast fortunes are made through the jade trade.

Global Witness, a British-based non-governmental organisation, estimated the sector was worth as much as \$31 billion in 2014 alone. This would have been almost the equivalent of half of national gross domestic product.

The organisation's Asia director, Mike Davis, said at the time that "Myanmar's jade business may be the biggest natural resource heist in modern history." He noted that it involved a "rogue's gallery of military hard-liners, army companies, proxy tycoons and major drug lords," who were raking in tens of billions every year.

Global Witness identified 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 former top military general, as major players. Their families allegedly netted \$220 million in pre-tax sales at the country's official jade emporium in 2014, and were beneficiaries of a raft of trade and tax concessions.

The trade has continued unabated, despite the supposed "transition to democracy" that the country's former military dictatorship began a decade ago. In practice, the army generals continue to dominate Myanmar.

Their rule has been given a democratic facelift by the integration of the National League for Democracy (NLD) into the government. For decades, the NLD claimed to oppose the ruling junta. Its leader Aung San Suu Kyi was hailed by the western powers and the corporate press as a heroic fighter for democracy.

The NLD, however, opposed military-rule from the standpoint that it cut the Burmese elite off from potential foreign investments and involvement in imperialist-dominated institutions. Its right-wing character has been demonstrated by the NLD's involvement in the brutal attacks on the Rohingya Muslim minority, that have dramatically escalated over recent years.

Suu Kyi, who has defended the persecution of the Rohingya, pledged in 2016 that the NLD-led government would reform the jade industry. Four years on, however, and nothing has changed.

Last year, the NDL supported the passage of a new gemstone law, which did not address the abuses suffered by migrant workers or contain any measures aimed at curtailing the criminal operations of the military and other wealthy concerns. It was condemned by human rights organisations and hailed by Myanmar's mining industry groups.

Suu Kyi responded to the latest disaster by vaguely lamenting the poverty of internal migrant workers and expressing "sadness" over the deaths.

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