



Myanmar's Forgotten Crisis

Environmental
Challenges Amid
War and Resistance



MOHINGA
MATTERS



Since 2020, Myanmar has endured some of the most trying times in its history, starting with the pandemic and followed by the military coup. Despite these hardships, the people of Myanmar have demonstrated extraordinary strength and resilience, as attested by the continued fight on the ground today.

Alongside the struggle for freedom, pressing issues such as education, economic recovery, and human rights demand attention. Currently, armed resistance is considered the priority. The widespread understanding is that meaningful progression in any development area is impossible under the control of military generals.

However, one urgent issue may not just patiently wait for the eradication of dictatorship in Myanmar: the escalating ecological crises. Recent natural disasters indicate that Myanmar's environmental challenges have escalated given the years of neglect by the successive military regimes as well as the general lack of awareness by the people.

This raises an important question: can environmental concerns be effectively addressed in a war-torn country? The answer seems close to impossible.

“ **Deforestation and extractive businesses are two main man-made activities that shape the region's environment and climate. Years of these activities have put Myanmar in a vulnerable position when it comes to environmental and climate impacts. ”**

What is climate change to Myanmar?

Climate change is affecting countries worldwide, including Myanmar. According to a [United Nations report](#),¹ Climate change is a “long-term shift in temperature and weather patterns.” While some of these changes happen naturally, human activities have largely driven climate change since the 19th century. Human actions include burning fossil fuels like coal, oil, and gas, the release of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane, which trap heat in the atmosphere. This extra heat disrupts the earth’s climate and leads to rising temperatures, unpredictable weather, and more extreme climate events.

The Industrial Revolution, which began in the mid-18th century, saw a big increase in emissions due to rapid growth in energy, industry, transportation, and agriculture in advanced nations. These activities led to lasting climate

changes that now impact distant and developing countries like Myanmar. Climate change worsens existing social and economic problems, highlighting the need for global efforts to reduce emissions and protect vulnerable countries.

Questions pose how and why Myanmar, a country far away from all the industrial developments, suffers from climate change. According to a [United Nations report](#), clearing land and deforestation can contribute to the release of carbon dioxide. Due to poor management and greed of the nation’s leaders, Myanmar has been facing illegal and enormous logging and excessive extraction of minerals. [Deforestation](#) and [extractive businesses](#) are two main man-made activities that shape the region’s environment and climate. Years of these activities have put Myanmar in a vulnerable position when it comes to environmental and climate impacts.



Photo: United Nations

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change>



I. Rich in green forests, cursed by the mismanagement

Myanmar's forests, covering [67.7 million hectares](#), are crucial for ecological balance, watershed protection, and carbon sequestration. They support biodiversity, prevent land degradation, and provide resources like timber and firewood. These forests hold cultural and spiritual importance for ethnic communities. It was said that Myanmar's teak forests attracted British colonization. Despite past forest management practices under the British administration, deforestation remains a significant issue due to economic and political pressures.

After gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar faced ethnic conflicts and civil unrest, diverting attention from forest conservation and leading to unregulated logging. The instability in the areas of Myanmar's forests also made it tricky to keep the same forest management practices left by the British. Despite these challenges, Myanmar's forests play a vital role in supporting local livelihoods and the environment, with the country's rich teak history remaining significant today.

The beginning of forest degradation

Generations and generations of military leaders in Myanmar are responsible for losing the valuable forests that are protecting the country's carbon emissions. The country has unfortunately faced three military coups in recent history. The first regime started after the military run by General Ne Win overthrew the democratically elected government led by civilian leader U Nu in 1962. The people of Myanmar suffered

from poverty while the Ne Win regime profited from the country's natural resources above and beyond.

After General Ne Win's military coup, logging in Myanmar increased dramatically. By the late 1980s, teak made up 42% of Myanmar's exports. This intense logging reduced forest cover from 70% to 65% between 1960s to 2000s.² Myanmar's annual deforestation rate was 0.3%, with significant losses.

² Forest cover change patterns in Myanmar (Burma) 1990–2000

General Ne Win's regime ruled 26 years in the country until the 1988 uprising overthrew him and his socialist government, but handed the nation in the hands of another group of military leaders. This shift in power once again put Myanmar's forests at stake.

U Soe Thura Tun, an environmental specialist who holds the position of the Union Minister for Electricity and Energy in the National Unity Government (NUG) cabinet, said, "After 1988, when the military took power and needed money fast, they sold off resources using the 'clearance system.' They cleared entire forests." The second-generation military generals deteriorated forest management and further caused significant deforestation.

In 2011, then-military leader General Than Shwe stepped down and the country turned its pathway into a semi-democratic nation. After the 2015 election, the long-time opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi finally took office. With this change in leadership, Myanmar saw civilian and opposition leaders in the cabinet offices after more

than five decades. This brought hope to tackle long-neglected environmental issues. The newly formed Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC) introduced the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Procedure. Conversations were initiated among experts, policymakers, local residents, and activists to create more sustainable and environment-friendly approaches to protect the remaining resources in the country.

These hopeful moments did not last as the military coup, led by commander-in-chief General Min Aung Hlaing, took place on 1 February 2021. All the democratic reform efforts went down the drain. In a [Nikkei Asia](#) report, forests in Myanmar, which accounted for 44% of the country's land in 2020, citing the World Bank, were one of the victims of the Min Aung Hlaing-led regime. Deforestation alerts continued to increase in 2024 with significant illegal teak trade through Myanmar's borders and ports. These activities have severe implications for the country's environment, biodiversity, and climate impact.



³ Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry Notification No. 616 / 2015 (29 December, 2015)

⁴ [Deforestation in Myanmar: Causes, Consequences, and Solutions](#)

U Soe Thura Tun explained, “Environmental conservation is a long-term task that requires careful execution. The army and regime leaders avoid it because they see it as costly and time-consuming. They focus on quick results, often leading to poor quality. Without knowing how long they will remain in power, they prioritize making mon-

ey quickly, compromising quality and sustainability.”

Along with the forest degradation, the country encounters worsening environmental impacts under the new military rule with limited effort to mitigate.



Photo: United Nations

Witnessing impacts of deforestation

[The United Nation Environmental Programme](#) described that forests are not just important for storing carbon; they also act as natural barriers, protecting against extreme weather like storms and floods. Even in recent years, Myanmar has already witnessed the impact of the lack of forests.

U Soe Thura Tun explained, “Lack of forest conservation leads to direct soil erosion and landslides as rain impacts unprotected soil. For instance, deforestation has caused Inle Lake to silt up, with sediment flowing in from around 2005 to 2010. Universities warned about this, and during U Thein Sein’s administration, Inle Lake swelled and flooded. When the water receded, villages previously on

water ended up on land. These issues are mainly due to deforestation.”

In late July 2015, severe flooding caused by Cyclone Komen [affected 5.4 million people in Myanmar, displacing 1.6 million](#). The government declared Chin and Rakhine states, as well as the Sagaing and Magway regions, as “natural disaster zones.” Nearly 100 people died, and extensive damage was done to farmland and homes. After the water receded, the people of Myanmar thought the worst flood in history had finished and paid little attention as it had gone. Little did they know the 2015 flood was just a warning and the worst one was yet to come.

On September 9, 2024, Typhoon Yagi caused severe flooding across Myanmar, [affecting nearly one million people and resulting in around 360 deaths and 100 missing persons](#). The floods heavily impacted several regions, including Nay Pyi Taw, Bago, Magway, Mandalay, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan. Floodwaters destroyed infrastructure and agricultural lands, worsening conditions for vulnerable populations, including 630,000 Rohingya in camps.

Channel News Asia conducted interviews with elders in their 60 to 70 years old in Nay Pyi Taw. People said that they had “never seen such a flood” in their lives. Ye Thu, a villager from Sin Thay village, Nay Pyi Taw remembered the night when the water level rose. His house was considered the center and highest point of the village. However, it only took half an hour for the house to sink. He lost two of his relatives in the flood.

He said, “Five of my family members were attempting to flee with their bullock cart. The dead body of one of my aunts was found but another one was still missing. So, we assume that two of them are already dead.”

Nobody experienced this magnitude of flood before and no one was prepared for that. On top of the worst flash flood in decades, victims barely received humanitarian assistance from the regime as it was busy conducting military operations including airstrikes in the country. Those floods were just an example of a natural disaster that hit Myanmar as the forests had been used to generate foreign incomes for generations of military leaders.

However, one can point out that local communities can also be held accountable to protect their forests from degradation. U Soe Thura Tun explained that the logging activities that local communities did were on smaller scales, but these activities could also contribute to forest degradation.

“Big forests with valuable timber are rarely destroyed by locals. It’s the smaller, less noticeable trees that they use. While locals might extract less in total, the number of trees and the area affected near them is significant. When these areas are degraded, they can’t protect against storm damage and floods.”



Photo: CJ

“ Over the past 80 years, nearly 75% of the mangroves in the Ayeyarwady Delta have disappeared due to human activities. This loss impacted local livelihoods and left the communities extremely vulnerable when destructive tropical storm Cyclone Nargis hit the country. On the night of 2 May 2008, Cyclone Nargis entered Myanmar, killing over 140,000 people and causing severe damage, especially in the Ayeyarwady Delta. ”

Mangrove forest degradation and Cyclone Nargis

Myanmar shares the coastline in the west with the Bay of Bengal, and in its south, with the Andaman Sea which naturally exposes it to sea-borne disasters. The country's coastline has been long protected by its enormous mangrove forests that can prevent storm damage and wave actions. While mangrove forests in coastal areas are home to numerous fish species and other biodiversity, they are also the best fuelwood for the locals. Over the past 80 years, nearly 75% of the mangroves⁵ in the Ayeyarwady Delta have disappeared due to human activities. This loss impacted local livelihoods and left the communities extremely vulnerable when destructive tropical storm Cyclone Nargis hit the country. On the night of 2 May 2008, Cyclone Nargis entered Myanmar, killing over 140,000 people and causing severe damage, especially in the Ayeyarwady Delta. The cyclone destroyed 38,000 hectares of mangroves, submerged 63% of paddy fields, and damaged 43% of freshwater ponds.⁶

Ayeyarwady region had never faced the severity of Cyclone Nargis in centuries and it took not only the lives of humans but also their livelihood. Ayeyarwady region used to be famous for its rice farming industry and freshwater fisheries but after the cyclone, two of these main businesses in the region were largely disrupted.

Hlaing Tha Ya township in Yangon is the gateway to Ayeyarwady Region with a highway bus terminal connecting the two regions. With industrial zones located, Hlaing Thar Yar township houses the largest population in Yangon Region and workers of any sort who hailed from other states/regions also chose to live there. In the post-Nargis time, squatter population rose in Hlaing Thar Ya due to incoming people from Ayeyarwady region in a hope of a better future and lives as their past lives were already destroyed by the most devastating cyclone.⁷ It is a vivid example of socio-economic impact caused by a natural disaster before our eyes.



Photo: CJ

⁵ Learning from Nargis, Investing in the environment for livelihoods and disaster risk reduction by UNEP

⁶ Learning from Nargis, Investing in the environment for livelihoods and disaster risk reduction by UNEP

⁷ Rural Urban Migration in Ayeyarwady Region: A Case Study of Ah Mar Sub-township, Phyappon District, MyintThida Associate Professor, Department of Geography, University of Yangon



Photo: Talinn Mg

II. Precious in the ground, cursed by the unearthing process

Myanmar’s mining industry, governed by the Mines Law (1994) and its 2015 amendments, supports mineral exploration, production, and gemstone processing. The country is rich in resources such as tin, copper, and many more. However, large-scale mining poses serious environmental threats, including deforestation, water and soil pollution, and biodiversity loss.⁸ Social issues

also arise, such as land displacement, poor compensation, unsafe working conditions, and health risks for local communities. Despite legal frameworks, stronger enforcement and sustainable practices are needed, even in the semi-democratic period, to balance economic benefits with environmental and social impacts.

Tragedy of landslides in jade mining sites

Northern hilly lands are rich in gemstones which attract businesses and individual explorers. Hpakant in Kachin State is particularly famous for its jade mines and at the same time notorious for landslides in jade mines that claim lives of mining workers. Mohinga Matters reached out to Ko Tarlinn Mg, a local journalist in Hpakant for his insights.

Ko Tarlinn Mg, said, “Hpakant is an area mainly exploring and mining jade”.

He explained that the mining companies, which were granted licenses by the government to operate, explore jade stones by unearthing with heavy machinery. Wastes from such mining processes are usually improperly disposed and formed towers in mounds hundreds of feet high⁹. The mine

⁸ Environmental issues of Mining activities in Myanmar, Su Yin Htun

⁹ https://openjadedata.org/stories/jade_and_environment.html

pits are also filled with water from the surrounding area.

Tarlinn continued, “When they [mountains of wastes] collapsed, it formed landslides and an inland tsunami that cost the lives of hundreds of illegal miners and local residents.”

On 28 February 2022, [a landslide in Hpakant buried dozens of jade miners](#), resulting in at least 23 deaths and 80 missing persons. This incident is part of a series of deadly landslides in the area, where legal mining has been banned since 2020. Previous landslides have resulted in over 500 deaths since 2015, due to corruption, poor environmental practices, conflict, and economic desperation.

Ko Tarlinn Mg reasoned, “The lack of safety procedures in the jade mining process caused the fatalities rate to rise.”

One could wonder why people would come to a place where their lives were not guaranteed and fatalities had already taken place multiple times.

The answer was years of crippling economy that no longer ensured unemployment and its impact, poverty, pushed many from across Myanmar

to Hpakant to scavenge leftover jade from abandoned mining sites.

In Hpakant, [over 500 companies extract jade using heavy machinery, often evading taxes by smuggling jade into China](#). Mining involves paying fees to both the ethnic armed group Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and government-backed militias, with the Myanmar military also benefiting. Due to the lack of processing technology, Myanmar depends on China, profiting minimally from its natural resources. Local people are frequently forced to relocate due to these mining business activities.

Tarlinn concluded, “There is no transparency on how much profit is made by the mining of gems. On top of that there is no return in favour for the local and the regional development.”

Little was reported about the profits the companies made from gem mining and responsible business practices were not applied, but news about landslides and death tolls were reported every now and then.

The growing extraction of rare earth elements

To reduce the CO2 emission, many consider electronic vehicles as the solution. An author named Paris Marx in his book [“Road to Nowhere”](#), wrote “In order to create an electric car, a lot of minerals need to be mined and much of that will continue to happen in the global south. And those mines have incredible environmental and health impacts in the places that they exist.”

Dysprosium and terbium, crucial heavy rare earth metals, are indispensable for clean energy and smart technology, especially in permanent magnets used in electric vehicles and wind turbines. These metals are vital for building a low-carbon future. While the world is focusing on renewable energy, tens of thousands of indigenous people in Kachin state have been suffering from the environmental impacts.

Mohinga Matters had a chance to talk to Ko Yoe [an alias], a local investigative reporter who worked on the illegal rare earth mining in Kachin state and requested anonymity for his security. He described his first impression of the site of rare earth mining.

“Mountains are like dried-limes which sucked out every juice from it”.

He warned, “The world’s leading green technology companies should understand how China supplies rare earth minerals. They need to see how indigenous people from the mining areas are losing their opportunities. The world is using rare earth minerals from regions where human rights are violated. These minerals come at the cost of thousands of locals suffering from environmental impacts.”

In the [Global Witness report](#), it described that the rare earth mining industry plays a central role in transitioning to global green energy, and highlighted that the heavy extraction of rare earths is extremely harmful to the environment, destroying landscapes and polluting water sources.

Ko Yoe shared his experience while investigating the story of rare earth mining.

“Locals said animals drinking downstream water got sick or died. When I visited, I didn’t dare wash my feet since they warned the water could cause itching and skin infections.”



Despite shutting down many domestic mines due to environmental concerns, [China remains the largest processor of rare earths](#), raising questions about its supply sources.

After the green forests, it is Myanmar's mountains and rivers that suffer. Due to its environmental preservation policy, China turned to Myanmar for rare earth mining, with about 16,000 people moving there to carry out rare earth extraction between 2016 and 2019.

Ko Yoe said, "The China-Myanmar border runs right over a single mountain. On the Myanmar side, I saw rare earth mines while the Chinese side was clear."

In recent years, Myanmar's north-eastern mines near the [Chinese border have expanded massively](#), covering an area as large as Singapore. Chinese entities funded these operations, with nearly half of the employees at each mine be-

ing Chinese, holding skilled positions, while Myanmar workers, including children, did manual labor.

U Soe Thura Tun concluded, "China has more resources but they protect their forests. Instead, they come to Myanmar to extract resources, targeting weaker countries. They process these resources into rare earth minerals for our phones and computers. China admits that 50% of these minerals come from Myanmar. To avoid severe environmental impact, China extracts from Myanmar, not from their land. As they get richer, they rebuild their environment."

Without a government that has the best interest of its people and the capacity to enforce responsible and sustainable business frameworks, the Myanmar people will continue to suffer from climate impacts due to the mismanagement, lack of transparency and accountability.

“ Climate change is a global issue, not just in Myanmar. Areas with protective zones are less vulnerable to natural disasters. Countries with fewer protections, like Myanmar, face greater impacts from climate change. Neighboring countries with forest resources may lessen the impact, but Myanmar often suffers more without these measures. ”

Is Myanmar the only country vulnerable?

The world has been witnessing an increase in the rate of natural phenomena. It is not just Myanmar facing unusual changes in weather conditions and climate impacts. The entire world is at risk. However, even regionally, Myanmar seems to be exposed to the highest risk of these impacts.

U Soe Thura Tun explained, “Climate change is a global issue, not just in Myanmar. Areas with protective zones are less vulnerable to natural disasters. Countries with fewer protections, like Myanmar, face greater impacts from climate change. Neighboring countries with forest resources may lessen the impact, but Myanmar often suffers more without these measures.”

“ The coup retracted all the reform efforts that Myanmar briefly saw in the timespan between 2011 and 2021, including the environmental conservation efforts. U Soe Thura Tun described this as ‘broken ore’ for the country’s conservation movement. Along with the military coup, bribery grew up so fast in every sector including the environmental sector. ”



Photo: CJ

Mega investments and their impacts

In addition to illegal logging and trading and illicit rare earth minerals and natural resources trade, there are several non-transparent [Chinese mega investments](#) in Myanmar. Since the “Going Global” policy was introduced in 2001, Myanmar received a significant inflow of Chinese investments and later became the largest trading partner in 2011. Myanmar is also crucial for China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR) project due to its strategic location and rich natural resources. However, the unstable political and business environment in the smaller neighboring country, marked by weak institutions, corruption, and poor governance, creates numerous environmental and social challenges.¹⁰

■ *Myitsone Dam*

Myitsone Dam is one of the earliest of such projects. The Myitsone Hydropower Dam Project, with a capacity of 13,360 MW and an estimated investment of \$3.6 billion, is one of the largest of seven planned dams on the upper Irrawaddy River.¹¹ In December 2006, Myanmar’s Ministry of Electric Power, under the command of former military dictator General Than Shwe, and China Power International signed a Memorandum of Understanding to develop this project. Myanmar is not new to hydropower, and dams have already supplied much of its electricity. However, building dams often disrupts the natural environment, dis-

U Soe Thura Tun pointed out that two key stakeholders were to blame, in addition to the greed from China. Cronies from Myanmar who sucked up Myanmar’s wealth for the long term and authorities that created such opportunities for these business people also shared responsibility.

He expressed “I don’t blame China alone. Whenever China invests, there’s always a Myanmar partner, usually a crony. The military includes these companies, leading to many problems. It’s not just China. India and the USA have their standards. They all consider long-term sustainability for big projects.”

places local people, and can worsen existing ethnic conflicts. The Myitsone Dam Project faced heavy criticism because it was located at one of the most important biodiversity hotspots and is a historically and religiously important area in Kachin State.

Concerns about the dam’s environmental and social impacts, including the potential displacement of more than 12,000 people from 63 villages and the significant effects on the Irrawaddy River ecosystem, led to public outcry. As a result, former president Thein Sein, who took control of the country after the so-called democratic transition, decided to temporarily suspend the project.

■ *Letpadaung Copper Mine*

The Letpadaung Copper Mine Project, managed by China’s Wanbao Mining and the military’s conglomerate Myanma Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL), has faced local protests since 2012 over land confiscation, environmental damage, and village displacement. Covering about 7,868 acres, it affected 26 villages, sparking widespread pro-

tests and violent crackdowns. Despite criticism, the project resumed in 2016 with commitments to better environmental protection, profit-sharing, and transparency to reduce public hostility. Wanbao committed to better environmental protection, profit-sharing, and transparency through publishing Environmental and Social Impact Assessments,

¹⁰ Evaluation of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) of Chinese EIA in Myanmar: Myitsone Dam, the Lappadaung Copper Mine and the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines, Thiri Shwesin Aung, Luan Shengji & Sharon Condon

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aiming to reduce public hostility.¹²

U Soe Thura Tun shared his experience in this case.

“At the Letpadaung Copper Mine Project, I saw China aiming for long-term management and profits by compensating and improving homes for locals. However, partners like MEC [another mili-

tary conglomerate] used poor-quality materials to save costs. China’s profits were partly due to local businesses’ corrupt practices. When private Myanmar businesses got involved, public trust was lost, leading to failures. It’s not fair to blame China alone.”

Sino-Myanmar Oil and Gas pipeline

The Sino-Myanmar pipelines, the 2,380 km long oil and gas pipelines, connecting Rakhine State’s Kyaukphyu deep-water port and China’s Yunnan Province and constructed in 2011 by the China National Petroleum Corporation, are vital for China’s energy policy, serving as the fourth largest energy transportation route. They transport oil from the Indian Ocean to southwestern China, reducing reliance on the Strait of Malacca. However, the construction faced significant local and international opposition due to environmental and social impacts, including community disruptions, human rights violations, and damage to ecosystems. Reports indicate that farmers have suffered since the project’s inception, with accusations of neglect in engaging with civil society and address-

ing these concerns.¹³ Regardless of the resistance and opposition, the pipelines for both oil and gas were completed in 2013 and 2014.

U Soe Thura Tun recalled his experience inspecting the environmental impacts of these pipelines.

“During the Sino-Myanmar pipeline construction, I studied surface and groundwater. We found high levels of magnesium and mercury in fish from the Irrawaddy River. Mercury, unlike cyanide, is hard to eliminate. Once it seeps into the soil, it’s almost impossible to remove. These environmental impacts were significant, and efforts were made to address them during the NLD government’s time.”



Photo: Tarlinn Mg

¹² Evaluation of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) of Chinese EIA in Myanmar: Myitsone Dam, the Lappadaung Copper Mine and the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines, Thiri Shwesin Aung, Luan Shengji & Sharon Condon

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Environmental impact assessment status in Myanmar

During the democratic transition, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC) approved [the Environmental Impact Assessments \(EIA\) Procedure](#) on 29 December 2015 and outlined all EIA implementation requirements.

Mohinga Matters talked to an officer from a third-party private company that linked up with foreign/local investors and the government sector to grant EIA. While he requested anonymity for security reasons, he shared some facts. Let us call him Ko Khant.

Ko Khant first explained what EIA was, how it was implemented, and how he was involved in the process.

“Myanmar falls behind in environmental conservation compared to developed countries. Business owners often hire third-party organizations to assess their projects’ environmental im-

pacts, including air and water quality, noise pollution, and waste management. Data is compared to government standards, and a report is submitted to the Environmental Conservation Department. If approved, the final report goes to MONREC in Nay Pyi Taw for an Environmental Compliance Certificate (ECC).”

Civilian members of parliament were actively involved in such activities which was long prohibited by military juntas for years. U Soe Thura Tun was such a parliamentarian and also a member of the Environmental Conservation Committee in the parliament.

He recalled, “Even during U Thein Sein’s era, we managed things well. We resolved many small cases and avoided big issues thanks to effective regulatory bodies. The Environmental Conservation Department promptly investigated and reported concerns. As the NLD’s power grew, so



Photo: CJ

did the parliament’s influence, and they complied with regulations. Military officers in our committee understood our intentions and cooperated. We resolved many problems at lower levels, preventing major issues. Over the past five years, we’ve maintained control well.”

Ko Khant, as a part of the third-party private company, spoke of a similar experience.

He said, “During the NLD government’s time, environmental conservation improved. Many business owners followed laws and procedures, considering feedback and inspections. As a result, they were more careful about environmental impacts to avoid harming their operations.”

U Soe Thura Tun further explained, “After winning the 2015 General Election, the NLD Party introduced detailed environmental procedures. The World Bank and ADB provided low-interest loans to support these efforts. Chinese companies in Myanmar had to follow the stricter local or Chinese environmental standards, leading to improvements in practices, especially between 2010 and 2021.”

Unfortunately, these good practices did not last long and everything was washed away together with the military coup. The coup retracted all the reform efforts that Myanmar briefly saw in the

timespan between 2011 and 2021, including the environmental conservation efforts.

U Soe Thura Tun described this as “broken ore” for the country’s conservation movement. Along with the military coup, bribery grew up so fast in every sector including the environmental sector.

U Soe Thura Tun raised his concern, “After the military coup, any regulatory body couldn’t enforce laws effectively, and environmental damage increased significantly over the past four years.”

Ko Khant also raised his experience of working in the post-coup period.

“After the military coup, many staff joined the Civil Disobedience Movement, causing a shortage of qualified employees. New staff often lacked skills, leading to delays and issues in environmental operations. Business owners faced difficulties obtaining approvals and certificates, often encountering corruption and bribes. The compliance process slowed down, and weakened regulatory bodies struggled to enforce laws, leading to increased environmental degradation. Many standards were only on paper, with real practices deviating from reports and requirements.”



Photo: United Nations



Photo: CJ

Conservation efforts in liberated territories

After Min Aung Hlaing staged the military coup, the country showed its opposition against the military regime with peaceful demonstrations. However, the peaceful protests turned into armed revolution after the regime's brutal crackdown and refusal to transfer power to the rightful leaders.

Three years later, the Myanmar military lost control of several territories in the country at a quick rate that no one had ever seen in decades. Ethnic armed organizations that only controlled the border areas in the past decade advanced deep into the army's stronghold and successfully raided and seized the areas, towns and capitals with the support of newly formed resistance forces.

Mohinga Matters asked U Soe Thura Tun about the status of environmental conservation in liberated areas and he replied that wells, oil fields, and factories remain in the protected areas but stressed the need for rehabilitation in the aftermath of Cyclone Mocha and a more strategic conservation effort.

"We need to rebuild roads and bridges damaged by Cyclone Mocha and create military routes, while preventing deforestation. We allocate taxes for environmental conservation, with each township having an emergency fund for natural disasters. Planting forests requires constant maintenance and protection. The NUG government tries its best with the resources we have."

Inquiring about the ethnic armed organizations' willingness to conserve the natural resources

in their territories, he shared their current relationship.

"The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) is knowledgeable and experienced. The NUG's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation consults with them. Currently, our resources are prioritized for military needs, but we are trying our best and making progress step by step."

Ko Yoe, raised his concerns about putting on hold conservations in a time of war.

"Currently, 90% of Kachin's natural resources are controlled by KIA. My concern is that KIA, focusing on the armed revolution, is struggling to preserve these resources. They are making slow progress. Locals and I hope KIA will welcome technicians from the NUG government and foreign experts to help preserve our resources and environment."

U Soe Thura Tun as a longtime environmentalist is determined to bring justice to those who committed crimes against the environment while the country struggled to regain power to the people.

"We had rebuilt from scratch before, and we will do it again. Our main goal is to return power to the people and restore everything quickly. Those responsible for wrongdoing, including environmental destruction, will face justice. Everyone who caused harm will be held accountable, not just those who used guns or abused people."

Conclusion

Many astronauts tend to say that when they took a look back to earth when they were in space they couldn't see any border lines. All they saw was a whole earth without countries, without race and without religion. We all are living in a blue dot in the pitch black universe. Natural disasters will not discriminate when they are ready to strike. The environment is not political. One can't live in the ivory tower when we are all sharing the same Mother Earth.

It does not matter if a single nation preserves its territories because we share the earth, its climates, weathers and the environment, and any

decision or policy made are consequential. The decisions or resolutions made in international conferences like COP are impactful to more vulnerable countries like Myanmar that probably do not even have a lot of say in such high-level meetings.

Climate change and environmental impacts are not an individual problem. It is a collective issue that we should come up with collective answers globally. This is the story of a vulnerable nation experiencing climate impacts while fighting the enemy within. This is a reminder that nations like Myanmar should not be forgotten when the global resolutions and policies are made.



Photo: CJ

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