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Update by Shan Human Rights Foundation

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Coal mining in Mong Kung threatens vital southern Shan State water source

The decision of two mining companies to continue coal excavation in Mong Kung township despite strong local opposition, threatens to block and pollute the headwaters of the Nam Teng river, one of the main waterways in southern Shan State, relied upon by thousands of farmers.

The two mining companies, Pyae Aung Hein and Hein Mitter, were given permission by the Naypyidaw government to begin exploring for coal in 2014, at a site about two miles southeast of Mong Kung town. The mining site lies in a watershed near the source of the Nam Teng river, which flows from Mong Kung, through Laikha, Namzarng, Keng Tawng and Lang Kho townships into the Salween River.

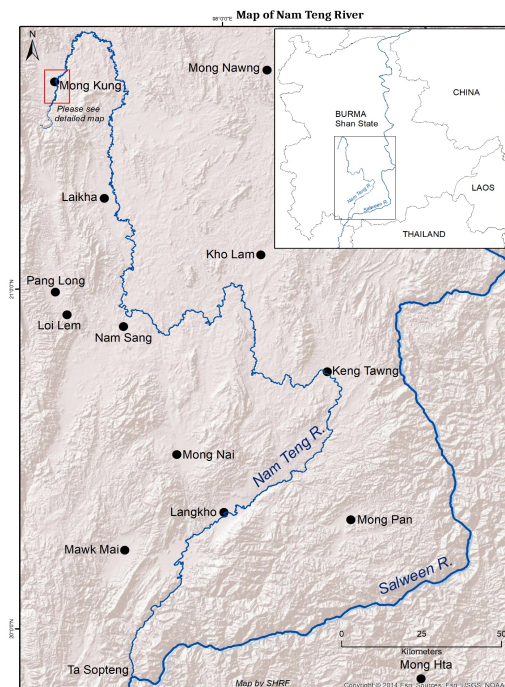
Aware of the threat to their vital water source, local Mong Kung residents have been strongly opposed to the coal mining since they first heard of the plans. They wrote letters to the companies, local township authorities, the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), the Forestry Department, the police and the local Burma Army battalion, urging that the mining plans be cancelled.

However, in December 2015, the two companies were granted a five-year permit by Naypyidaw to dig for coal in a 200-acre concession area. In January 2017, they began digging.

The mining site lies in a forested mountain area with several streams – Nam Huay Hsim, Nam Huay Mar and Nam Kung Lome – which flow into the Nam Khi Sang stream, which flows into the Nam Teng. Along the Nam Khi Sang stream, and in the nearby hills, local farmers grow rice, corn, peanuts, water melons and pineapples. A family can earn about 1,500,000 kyat (USD 1,100) per year from growing pineapples.

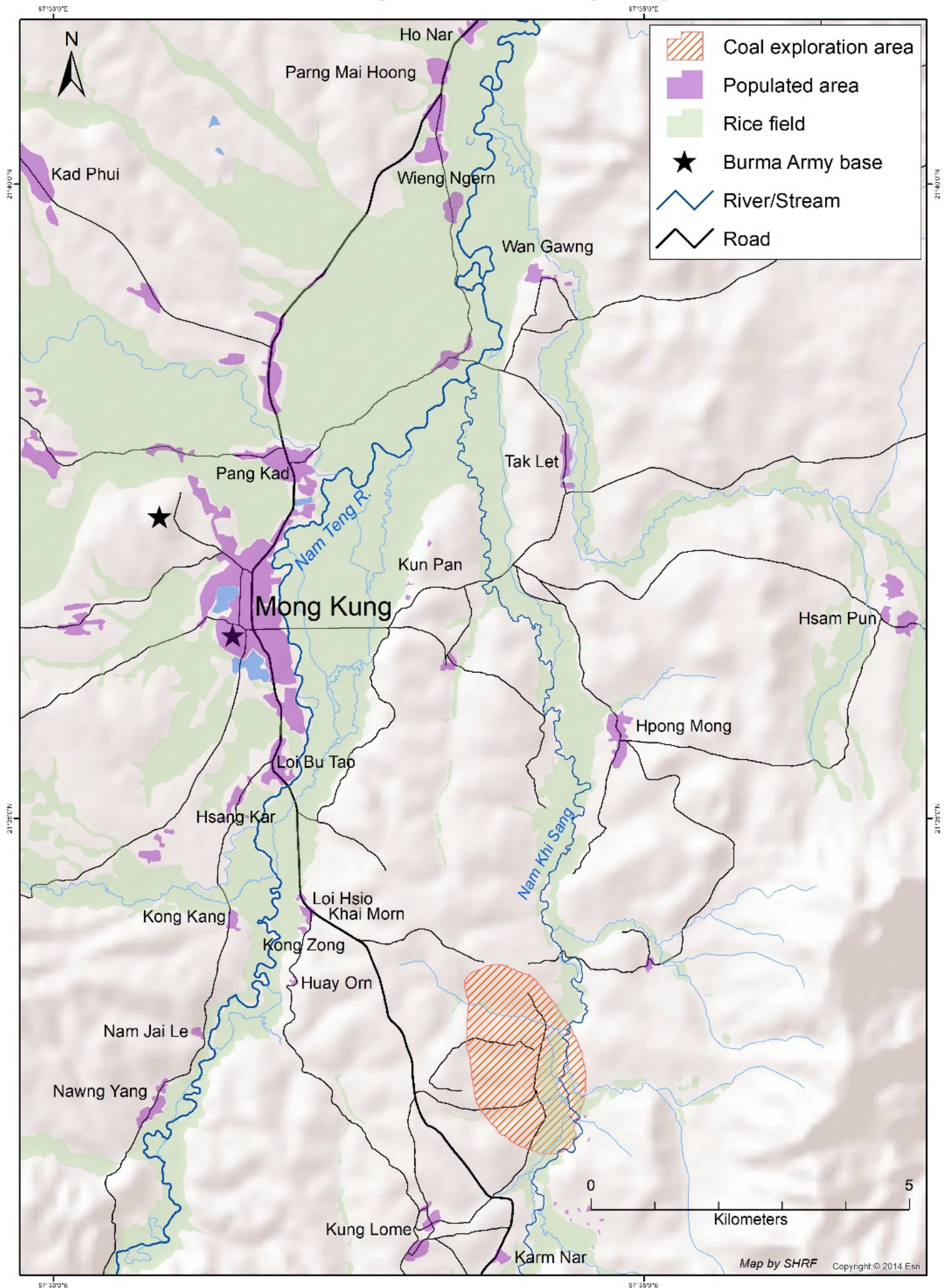
The pinewood forest at the mining site has been protected by local people for generations, who go there to forage for wild vegetables and mushrooms. They do not let anyone cut down the trees, but only collect wood for kindling. However, since February this year, the companies have already cut down about 6.6 acres of forest, using some of the wood to build their workers' housing, and selling some to locals at a cheap price.

Thousands of tons of coal have already been dug up, and piled up near the mining site, blocking the flow of water to the farms along the Nam Khi Sang stream. Farmers are also worried that rains will wash mining waste down onto their farms, destroying their crops.



Map of Nam Teng River

Coal mining location in Mong Kung





Coal mining site



A pile of coal inside the coal mining site

A farmer from Quarter 7 in Mong Kung town said: “The mining waste is covering the Nam Huay Hsim stream. There is a lot of waste piled up beside the stream, which will damage our farms. Farmers around here have been farming these lands for 4-5 generations.”

The farmers who cultivate crops close to the mining area are mostly from the following villages: Hpong Mong (50 households), Mark Lang (40 households), Wan Dee (40 households), Koong Jong (20 households), Wieng Ngern (70 households), Loi Shio (40 households), Loi Bu Tao (80 households), Kun Pan (50 households) and Wan Kuay (30 households). Many of these communities were forcibly relocated by the Burma Army to Quarter 7 of Mong Kung town in 1996-7, to stop them from supporting Shan resistance troops, but they have continued to cultivate their farms near their original villages – close to the current mining site.

Locals are also worried about water pollution from the coal mining waste which may harm the fish and other creatures living in the Nam Teng and the streams flowing into it. They catch this fish for their own consumption.



Nam Teng River in Lang Kho, southern Shan State

Although coal has not yet started to be transported out of the area, residents also worry that hundreds of 10-wheel trucks will be passing through their villages, causing air pollution, damaging roads and threatening road safety. Residents do not know where the coal will be transported to, but it is rumoured it may be transported to Lashio and Kyaukme in northern Shan State.

Because of all these fears about the social and environmental impacts of the coal mining, local community leaders decided to organize a large protest against the mining companies on April 11, 2017. The day before, news about the protest was announced by megaphone, and leaflets were handed out in Quarter 7 of Mong Kung town, and the village tracts of Wan Yard, Kad Phui and Wieng Ngrn.

On April 11, 2017, about 4,000 local villagers, monks, village leaders, local authorities and Lung Sai Long, a local MP for the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), joined the protest. They gathered first at Mwe Taw Temple in the Mong Kung town, then went to a spirit shrine north of Wan Loi Shio, Wan Yard village tract, near the mining site. At the shrine, they held a ceremony and inflicted curses against the mining companies for ignoring local opposition to the mining. They then walked to the mining site. Although the organizers had given orders that there should be no violence at the protest, when they reached the mining site, some protesters attacked and damaged some of the cars belonging to the mining company.



A mass protest by local residents on April 11, 2017

Two days later, on April 13, at 5.30 pm, two representatives from Pyae Aung Hein and Hein Mitter, Nang Harn and Lung Tun, came to meet about 50 local villagers, monks, local SNLD MP Lung Sai Long, the Quarter 3 leader, and village tract leader, Lung Teving, at Wat Karng Temple in Quarter 4 of Mong Kung town. At this meeting, they promised to stop all their operations within one month, by May 13, 2017.



Checkpoint set up by coal mining company

However, the companies have not kept their promise. Instead of leaving, they have set up fences and checkpoints around the mining area, and have continued digging and destruction of the Nam Khi Sang watershed.

SHRF is appalled by the callous disregard of these mining companies to the wishes of the local communities, and their continuation with a project that is so clearly socially and environmentally damaging.

SHRF calls for the immediate cancellation of this coal mining project. We also reiterate our calls for a moratorium on all resource extraction projects in ethnic areas until there is a negotiated political settlement to the conflict, and federal reform giving local communities the right to protect natural resources in their areas.

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