

Voice of Karen villagers from Doo Playa District

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The Karen villagers urge Myanmar government to suspend mega development projects during peace process with KNU.

As the current Myanmar government strategy is using the peace process to push mega development projects before political solution, in dealing with ethnic armed groups including the KNU, there is a worry that there has been no clear economic and development policy to ensure that the Karen people will benefit.

Due to these concerns, on October, 26-28, 2012 a “Peoples Forum” took place in Kyainn Seik Gyi township where over 100 people from 27 villages including leaders of village community development project committees from Kyainn Seik Gyi township of Karen state and Ye township of Mon state who have been democratically elected by local villagers representing (15,000) villagers, met and discussed the development issues and peace talks between the KNU and the Myanmar government.

“ We actually aim to create a space for people to freely come and share their opinions without any fear regarding to the current cease-fire process and mega development projects, and then we collectively make their recommendations to stakeholders” said Saw Lu Ber Moo, spokesperson for the forum.

Dramatically, during recent years, there have been many mega development projects implemented or planned by the Myanmar government with influx of foreign investments into the Karen state and many other Karen areas.

Villagers at this forum determined that both the Myanmar government and the KNU should improve the cease-fire and peace process to include the role of the people and the civil groups in order to bring the benefit to the affected people and to the whole Karen people.

“ The government and the KNU also need to allow the participation of the people in the decision making in peace process and development in order to have sustainable peace and development in the country” said Saw Lu Ber Moo.

According to the Burma Border Consortium TBBC, partners conducted poverty assessments with over 4,000 households across 21 townships in rural communities of South East Myanmar and found that 59 % of households are impoverished with the indicator particularly severe in

northern Karen areas where there have been allegations of widespread and systematic human rights abuse.

This is the second “ people forum” organized by the Karen civil groups with local key village leaders from conflict affected areas discussing the facts based on the issues from the first “ people forum” organized in Mutraw (Papun) district, in May 10 of 2012.

During this people forum, farmers both from low land and highland with local Karen civil groups discussed the issues on the impacts by peace process and mega development projects.

Finally, during the 3 days of people forum, all villagers agreed on some recommendations as follows;

Current peace process

- 1) The peace process must be genuine, transparent and sustainable.
- 2) The government must withdraw all its troops based in villages and in areas where villagers carry out their livelihoods, so that villagers can have freedom to re-establish their livelihoods.
- 3) Land mines in the Karen State must be removed.
- 4) All forms of forced labor and arbitrary taxation must be stopped. There must be constitutional guarantees that people can own their land and farm freely.
- 5) Internally displaced persons must not be pressured to return to their homes while Burmese troops remain in their areas and landmines have not been removed.
- 6) Any plans for return and rehabilitation of internally displaced persons must be drawn up together with local Karen community-based organizations, and must guarantee the security of villagers; special provisions must be made for the protection and welfare of women and children.
- 7) The representatives of the international countries and the UN must be included to monitor any peace talk between the KNU and Myanmar government.
- 8) In Villages and towns both in the Karen state or in other areas of Burma where dense Karen population are, the government must allow the Karen people to learn their own language in government school legally.

Mega-development projects

- 1) During the peace negotiation process, large-scale economic investment must be suspended and develop the appropriate policies.
- 2) Political negotiations between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the government must address the issue of local ownership of resources
- 3) In order for mega-development projects to proceed, there must be legal safeguards and policies which guarantee the following:
 - The people must have full access to all relevant information and facts about planned projects.
 - Before projects start, there must be transparent, independent environmental and social impact assessments which include the impacts on women and children.
 - Local villagers must participate freely in decision-making around any development projects. These projects must not harm our culture and lands, and must ensure that our ancestral natural heritage is preserved.
 - If the projects have any destructive impacts, the affected people must receive fair compensation according to agreed upon rates. There must also be complaint mechanisms for affected people.

Humanitarian aid

- 1) Humanitarian funds and programs must support and build upon existing community development programs operated by villagers and community based organizations.
- 2) The humanitarian aid must be based on the real need for the people and must not harm the dignity of the people or be affiliated with political benefit for political purpose.

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