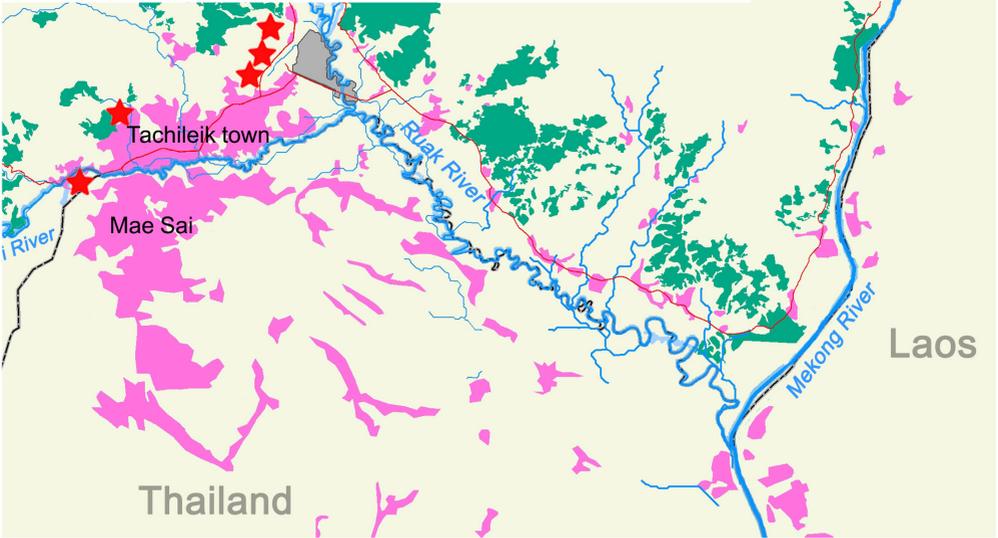




# Protect the Golden Triangle's Ruak River Basin

SAC go-ahead for UWSA factories in Tachileik threatens far-reaching pollution

SHAN HUMAN RIGHTS FOUNDATION  
AUGUST 2021



## Summary

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Renewed efforts by the United Wa State Army's Hong Pang conglomerate, backed by the SAC regime, to push through construction of two factories on confiscated land near Tachileik, a kilometer from the Thai border, are being strongly opposed by local communities, who want their farmland returned and fear far-reaching polluting impacts.

The factories are planned on 100 acres of land east of Tachileik town, part of a 600-acre plot confiscated from residents of Hong Luek village in 1998-1999 by the Burma Army to set up an industrial zone. The 100 acre-plot was acquired by the Hong Pang company in 2001 for factories which were never built.

In 2011, the Hong Luek farmers started appealing to the USDP government for the return of their lands in the industrial zone, which they had continued to farm where possible. Despite ongoing appeals after the NLD government came to power, on September 5, 2019, the Shan State government granted permission to Hong Pang's Loi Sam Song company to build two factories on their 100 acre plot: a rubber crumb factory and a manganese processing factory.

In October 2019, the UWSA company tried to start fencing off the land, but the farmers blocked this. The company sued them for trespass and destruction of property, but did not proceed with construction. During 2020 and early 2021, the farmers continued to block efforts by the company to fence off their farmlands, and to appeal through official channels for land return.

On May 6, 2021, three months after the military coup, the company suddenly brought in bulldozers to begin levelling the land. When local farmers and monks again blocked this, police were brought in to protect the company workers, showing that the new regime was backing the UWSA's plans.

During May and June, despite intimidation, locals bravely continued to try and block the company's construction efforts, but the company was allowed to work at night, during curfew hours, managing to lay cement fencing foundations around the land, which are difficult to remove. Construction has paused since early July, but locals assume this is because of the Covid lockdown.

Locals are opposing the factory construction not only due to loss of farmlands, but also fears of pollution, particularly of the Ruak River, which flows past the industrial zone before forming the border with Thailand and flowing into the Mekong River at



the Golden Triangle confluence.

During the past few years, Thai water authorities have measured dangerous levels of manganese in the Ruak River, from which the Mae Sai water supply is pumped. This is likely due to contamination from existing manganese mines north of Tachileik and manganese ore stockpiles, all in the Ruak River catchment area. Construction of a manganese processing factory directly beside the Ruak River will greatly worsen the existing contamination, which is particularly dangerous for children's health.

Locals also worry about air pollution from both factories, particularly the foul smell of rubber processing, which will permeate the eastern suburbs of Tachileik and adjoining areas of Mae Sai in Thailand, causing adverse health impacts and damaging the tourist industry.

Manganese mining and widespread rubber cultivation in Tachileik have already negatively impacted the local environment and livelihoods, for the enrichment of military elites and outside investors. The planned factories are poised to inflict even further damage, on both sides of the border.

SHRF strongly supports the brave efforts of the Hong Luek villagers to protect their lands, and urges the SAC and UWSA to immediately cancel the planned factory projects, so that the lands can be returned to their rightful owners.

We are inspired by the Mae Sai residents' successful blocking 20 years ago of Hong Pang's efforts to build a polluting coal-fired power plant in Tachileik, and hope that Mae Sai communities will mobilize again to join this new struggle to protect our shared Ruak river basin environment.



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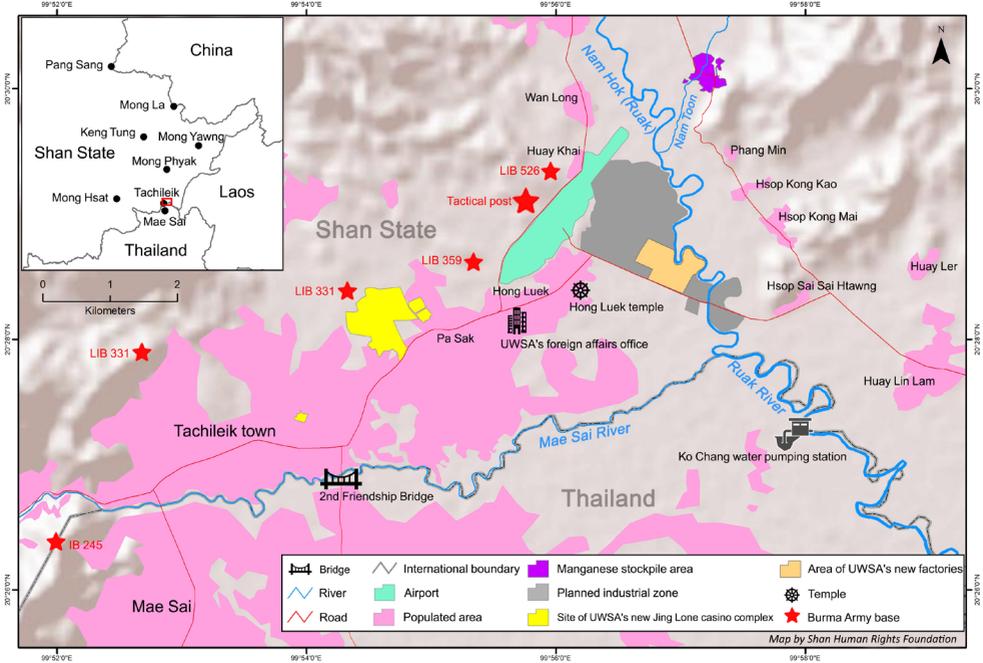


# Introduction

This report aims to draw attention to the brave struggle of the Hong Luek villagers to regain their farmlands unlawfully confiscated by the Burma Army over 20 years ago, and to highlight the danger to communities on both sides of the Thai-Burma border if the UWSA’s planned factories on this land go ahead. We fear that these factories are just the beginning of a series of harmful concessions that the new SAC regime will be making to the UWSA in return for their ongoing political cooperation after the coup.

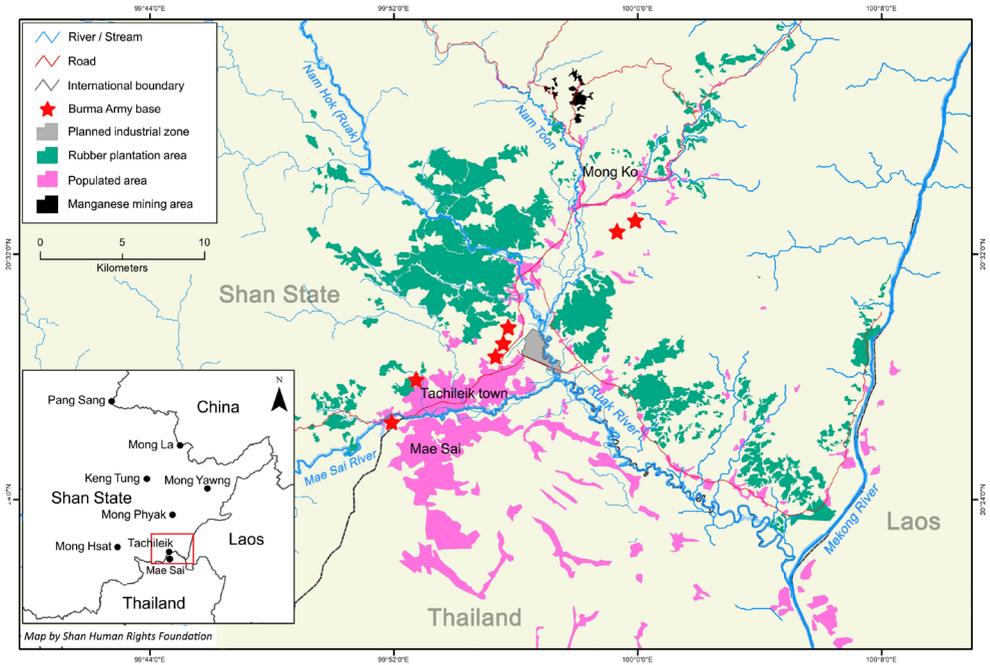
We hope that all residents of the Ruak river basin, on both sides of the border, will join the struggle to protect our shared environment.

Location of UWSA's planned factories in Tachileik Industrial Zone





### Rubber plantations and manganese mines in Ruak river basin area



## Timeline of confiscation of farmlands of Hong Luek villagers in Tachileik

| Date          | Description  |
|---------------|--|
| 1998-1999     | The military authorities under the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) confiscated 601.54 acres of farmland 5 kms east of Tachileik town to set up an industrial zone. At that time, Major Pe Thein was the SPDC District Administrator. Some farmers no longer dared farm their land in this area, but some continued farming as they had no other land.   |
| 2000          | About 100 acres in the western corner of the industrial zone were divided into blocks and sold off, mainly to Chinese and Wa investors. The Tachileik authorities ordered all car repair workshops to move out of the town centre to the industrial zone, and some businesses were set up there. As the remaining 500 acres of the industrial zone were not being used, some farmers carried on farming their original lands.    |
| July 27, 2001 | 100 acres in the industrial zone was granted to Hong Pang company to build a plastic pipe factory and animal feed factory. However, Hong Pang only used 11.16 acres for a pig and chicken rearing project, and left the rest of the land disused, so local farmers kept using it.  |
| May 2011      | Hong Pang company tried to fence off the 100 acres of land which they had been granted in 2001, but the farmers using this land resisted, and began appealing officially to the government for the return of their lands.  |
| 2012          | Local farmers wrote a letter to the Tachileik township land authorities asking for the return of their lands in the industrial zone. There was no reply.   |
| June 2013     | On June 16, 2013, Hong Pang used backhoes to destroy a house built on their land in the industrial zone. The owner, Sai Won Kaew, was running a sand dredging business at the site, with permission of the authorities. He threatened to sue Hong Pang, and on June 18, he was shot in the head and killed while riding a motorbike in Hong Luek. The gunman, who escaped on a motorbike, is assumed to have been hired by UWSA. |

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| 2013         | Some of the farmers travelled to Naypyidaw to appeal to the government for the return of their lands.  |
| Aug 7, 2015  | The Shan State government (under President Thein Sein) authorized the Land Management Committee to investigate the issue of the confiscated land in Hong Luek.   |
| Late 2015    | The farmers wrote a letter to Aung San Suu Kyi requesting the return of their land.  |
| Dec 31, 2015 | The Tachileik Land Management Committee sent a letter to the Shan State Land Management Committee reporting that no compensation or replacement land had been given to the farmers whose lands had been confiscated.       |
| 2016         | Some farmers' representatives went to Naypyidaw to hand over a letter appealing for the return of their land.  |
| 2017         | An NLD MP in Tachileik went to meet the farmers, and offered to help, saying he would put in a request to the government for the return of their lands.  |
| Mar 3, 2018  | Farmers appealed for help from NLD representatives, who were visiting Tachileik at the opening of a party branch office  |
| May 21, 2018 | 137 farmers sent a letter of appeal to President U Win Myint for the return of their land.   |
| Oct 2018     | Farmers sent a letter to the NLD branch office in Tachileik, but no reply  |
| Dec 2018     | Farmers sent a letter to the NLD branch office in Tachileik again, but no reply.   |
| Dec 3, 2018  | U Soe Nyunt Lwin, the Shan State Minister of Planning and Finance, came to Tachileik and promised to return the land to the farmers.   |
| Early 2019   | Tachileik land officials met with the farmers and promised verbally to arrange the return of their farmlands, and compensation for lands which had already been sold. They said this would be done before June 2019.       |
| Sep 5, 2019  | The Shan State government granted permission to Loi Sam Song company (part of the Hong Pang Group) to build a rubber crumb factory and manganese processing factory on the 100 acres of land granted to Hong Pang in 2001. |



*Some of the Hong Luek farmers who lost their land*

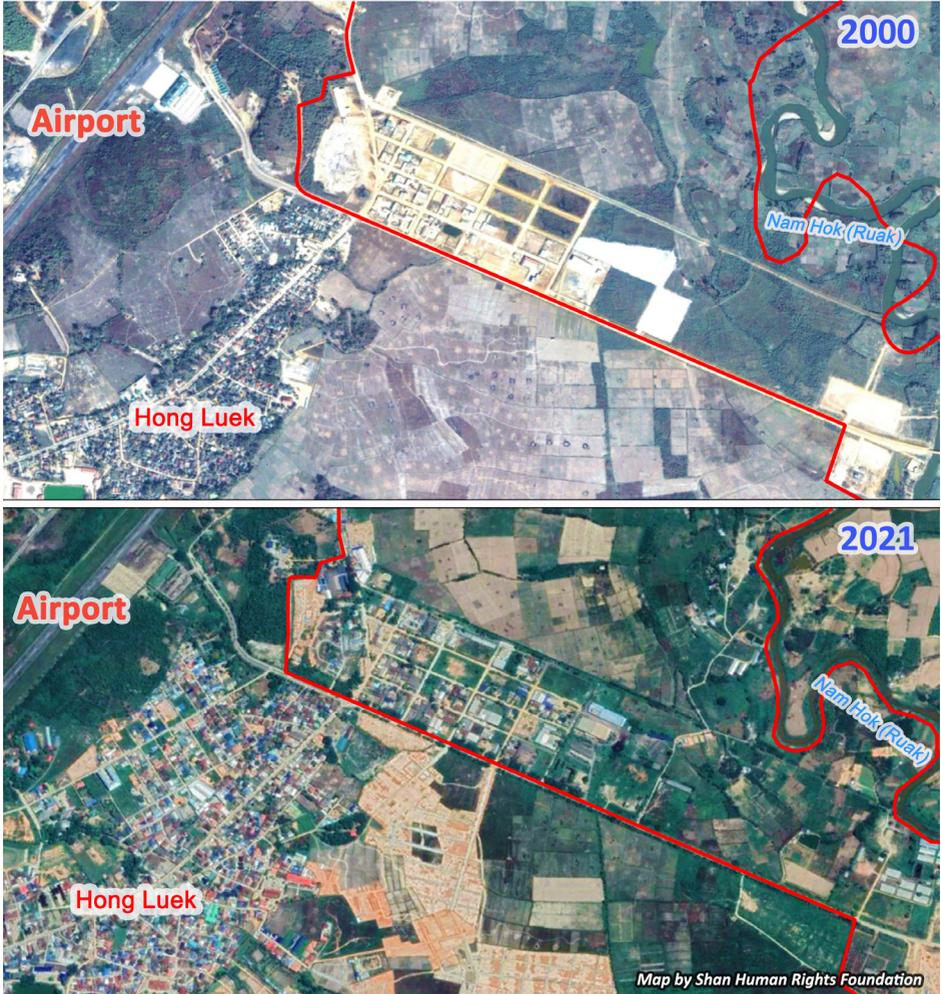


*Fencing erected by Loi Sam Song company*

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Sep 19, 2019 | Loi Sam Song Co. put up flags around the land granted for the factories, which 67 farmers were using to grow crops.  |
| Oct 24, 2019 | Loi Sam Song Co. put up signboards around the farmland saying “No trespassing”   |
| Oct 26, 2019 | Loi Sam Song Co. workers came to fence off the farmland, but the local farmers resisted this, so the fencing was suspended.  |
| Nov 19, 2019 | The Hong Luek farmers’ representatives went to give an appeal letter to Sai Lin Myat, SNLD MP for Monghsu, at the SNLD Taunggyi office. He said the letter would be sent to all State ministers. Copies were also sent to all government offices in Tachileik, but there was no reply.   |
| Nov 2019     | After the farmers returned home from Taunggyi, Loi Sam Song Co. workers again went to fence the land. This time, villagers brought knives to prevent the fencing, and the company sent a letter of complaint to the District and Township municipal offices in Tachileik, and sued 4 leading farmers (3 men and 1 woman) under Sections 427 (Mischief causing damage), 447 (Trespass) and 506 (Intimidation) |
| Feb 20, 2020 | Loi Sam Song Co. brought in bulldozers to level the land, but the villagers blocked them from doing so.  |
| Mar 18, 2020 | Farmers sent a letter of appeal to the State Counsellor’s Office.  |
| Apr 2020     | District and township municipal officials, together with NLD MPs, called a meeting with the villagers at the Hong Luek temple. They explained with a map that 317 acres of land would be returned to villagers. All villagers were very happy to hear this.  |
| Apr-May 2020 | Government land surveyors came to measure the farmlands in the industrial zone, but it was during the hot season, so rice had not yet been planted. The surveyors therefore said that the land was vacant, and no one was using it. The surveyors also claimed that local farmers had agreed to accept compensation from Loi Sam Song Co. for 34 acres of land, but this was not true.                       |



## Timelapse images of Tachileik Industrial Zone



|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Nov 2020     | Loi Sam Song Co. came to fence the land again and the villagers blocked them again. Villagers went to complain to the local quarter administration authorities, and twice at township municipality office. The authorities said the farmland would be filled in, divided into blocks and sold off, but some blocks would be given to some farmers, on a lucky draw basis.  |
| Apr 8 2021   | The Tachileik court dismissed the legal case against the 4 farmers for lack of evidence.   |
| May 6, 2021  | From 10:30-11 am, Loi Sam Song Co. brought two bulldozers to flatten the land in the fields. Local monks from Hong Luek temple went to stop them, saying that this was villagers' land. The bulldozers were then withdrawn from the fields.  |
| May 8, 2021  | At midday, the police went to the abbot of Hong Luek temple and told him that the next day they would be taking security for Loi Sam Song company, and that villagers should not gather there in numbers of over 30 or they would be arrested (citing Covid prevention regulations).   |
| May 9, 2021  | At 9:30 am, Loi Sam Song Co. came to fence the land., with police security. A group of villagers (numbering less than 30) came to stop them. The police said that no pictures were allowed to be taken, or their phones would be seized, but the police themselves took photos of the farmers. When the company had put up about 10 meters of fencing, the farmers destroyed the fencing. This went on repeatedly till 5 pm. The police took photos of the fencing that had been destroyed. The police went to tell the local quarter administrative chairman that the building materials must not be touched, and if any materials were lost or destroyed, villagers would be sued. |
| May 10, 2021 | Farmers wrote a letter to the Chair of the Shan State SAC, Dr. Kyaw Tun, appealing for help to stop the company from taking their land, and to return their land.  |
| May 18, 2021 | Workers from Loi Sam Song came at night to fence the land. When farmers came to look, the workers fired a gun two times to threaten the farmers.   |

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| May 24, 2021              | Phone Naing Win, an ex-Burma Army soldier (living in Hsan Hsai, Tachileik), working as a broker for Loi Sam Song Co., reported the abbot of Hong Luek temple to the police and local Maha Sangha (Monks' Association), and threatened to sue him for leading local villagers to destroy the fence.                                |
| May 28, 2021              | At 10 am, local monks went to demolish the fencing which was secretly erected by the company at night.  |
| May 28, 2021              | 1-4 pm, the Hong Luek abbot, three other monks and four villagers went to Wat Hsai Mong for a hearing about the case, but the company failed to attend the hearing. The hearing was chaired by the patron of the Tachileik Monks' Association. The Hong Luek abbot was formally warned to stop taking action against the company. |
| May 30, 2021              | Starting from 8 pm, Loi Sam Song Co. came to erect about 150 meters of fence, using metal poles in cement foundations. They also dug water ditches along each side of the fence, to make it difficult to come near the fence.   |
| May 31, 2021              | At 9 am, farmers went to destroy the fence erected the previous night.  |
| Jun 2, 2021               | Farmers went to put up fencing around their farms, but that night, company workers came to destroy the farmers' fences and burned down two farmers' huts. The Hong Luek abbot went to Taunggyi to appeal to talk to USDP officials about the land issue, but there was no result.   |
| Jun 3-30, 2021            | The company carried on building fencing and bulldozing the land. Farmers continued to pull up any parts of the fencing they could.  |
| July 1, 2021              | At 8 pm, company workers came to build the fence, with battery acid to pour on the farmers' rice seedlings. Luckily, some farmers were still in their farms, and blocked them. The workers ran away, dropping a rifle. The farmers reported this to the authorities and handed in the rifle, but no action was taken.             |
| July 2 – mid-August, 2021 | No company workers have come to the site, but farmers assume this is because of the Covid lockdown.   |



*Police providing security for company manager watching villagers destroying Loi Sam Song fencing*



*Villagers destroying the fence erected by Loi Sam Song Company*

## Background of Hong Pang's operations in Tachileik

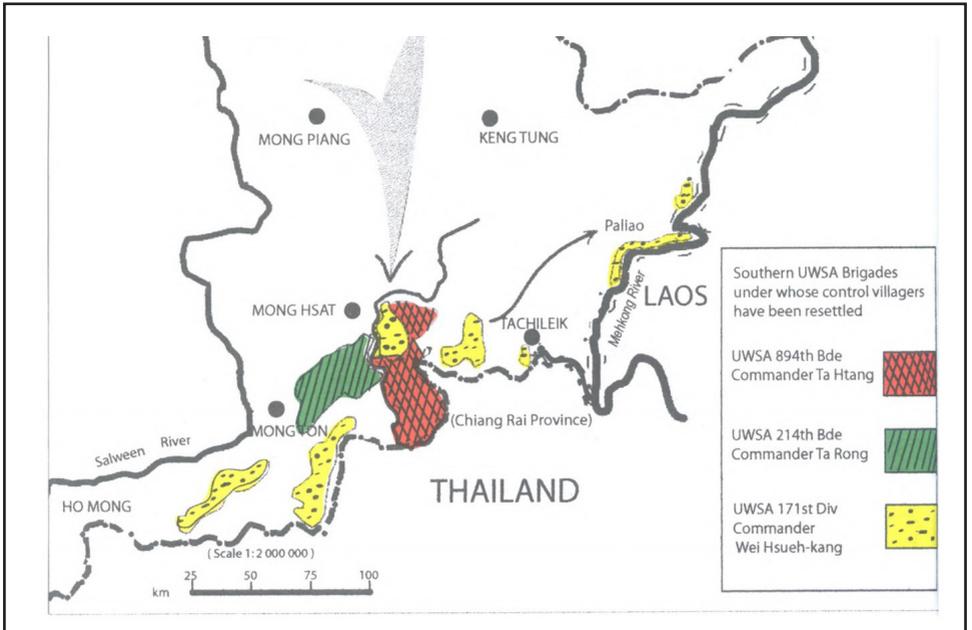
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Hong Pang company was set up in 1997<sup>1</sup> by Wei Hsueh-Kang, the ethnic Chinese leader of the UWSA's 171 Division in southern Shan State, as a legal front for the UWSA's economic operations, formerly entirely reliant on the drug trade. Hong Pang developed into a vast business conglomerate, spanning multiple sectors including construction, mining and agriculture. Hong Pang's clear money-laundering function had the full blessing of the military regime, whose primary concern was to keep the UWSA neutralized through their ceasefire, and use them to counter the Shan armed resistance in southern Shan State.

By 1997, the UWSA had already gained a sizable territorial foothold along the Shan-Thai border, granted by the regime in return for fighting the Mong Tai Army, which surrendered in 1996. The main southern UWSA territory was in Mong Yawn in southern Mong Hsat. Wei Hsueh-Kang's 171 Division was based at Wan Hoong, 10 kilometers southeast of Mong Hsat town. Hong Pang's initial projects in southern Shan State involved trading, agriculture, livestock breeding and construction.

The UWSA's ambition to expand into southern Shan State became clear at the end of 1999, when it began a mass population transfer of Wa villagers from northeast Shan State down to the Thai border. By late 2001, over 126,000 people – about a quarter of Burma's Wa population -- had been forcibly resettled, mainly to Mong Hsat and Mong Ton townships, but also Tachileik, where over 3,400 Wa were moved into lands controlled by Wei Hsueh Kang near Keng Larb along the Mekong River<sup>2</sup>. Some were also resettled in Tachileik town, where UWSA had been given land – confiscated from local farmers -- by then Triangle Regional Commander Thein Sein, and where it was an open secret that drugs were being produced<sup>3</sup>.

Hong Pang was awarded various business concessions by the military regime at this time, including a BOT agreement to pave the 102-mile Tachileik-Kengtung road, completed in 2001.



*Areas of southern Shan State to which Wa villagers were forcibly resettled in 1999-2001 (map from Unsettling Moves by LNDO)*



## Thai communities block Hong Pang's planned coal-fired plant in Tachileik

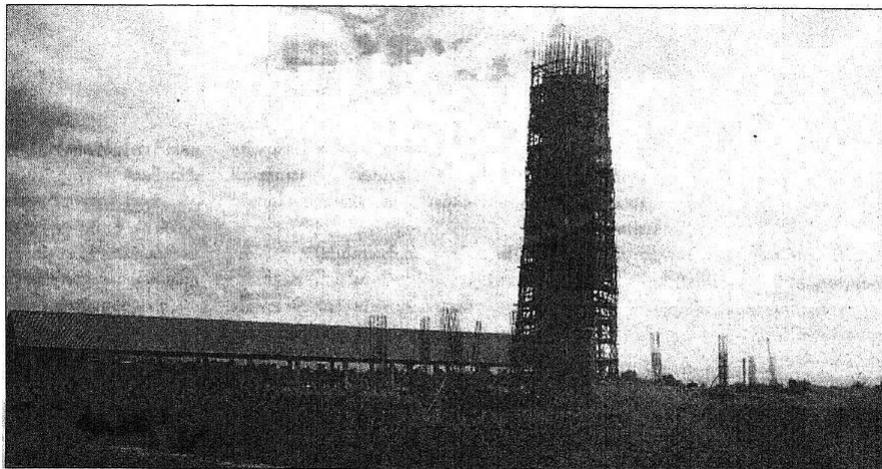
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The UWSA's close relations with the regime were evident in May 2000, when army chief General Maung Aye personally came to lay the cornerstone for a 12 megawatt coal-fired power plant to be built by the UWSA's Golden Triangle Hydro Electric Power company (under Hong Pang) just north of Tachileik town. However, the plant was never built, due to opposition from residents of the adjacent Thai town of Mae Sai, concerned about air pollution, who physically blocked trucks carrying construction equipment (of Chinese origin) from Thailand in April 2001. Bilateral tension, due to the incursion of Burma Army troops across the northern Chiang Rai border during fighting against the Shan State Army and shelling into Mae Sai in February 2001, also likely influenced the Thai government to back local protesters against the power plant.

The coal-fired plant was intended to provide power not only to Tachileik residents, who relied on electricity from Thailand, but also to the new industrial zone near Tachileik airport, where Hong Pang had been given 100 acres to build several factories. The power plant's cancellation was likely a contributing factor to the delay in UWSA's plans to develop its property in the industrial zone.

At the same time, the UWSA's increasing international notoriety as drug producers was forcing the Burmese military regime to take token measures against Hong Pang and Wei Hsueh Kang's growing business empire. When General Maung Aye visited Thailand in April 2002, he was requested by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to crack down on Hong Pang. Within two weeks of Maung Aye's return to Burma, Hong Pang branch offices were closed down in several locations, including Tachileik<sup>4</sup>. In December 2002, hundreds of UWSA troops under Wei Hsueh Kang's brother Wei Hsueh Ying were ordered to abandon their territory along the Mekong River under a so-called "anti-drug operation", and by March 2003 had moved west to Mong Hsat and Mong Ton<sup>5</sup>.

However, Hong Pang's business operations continued as usual, including in Tachileik, but using different company names.



*Initial construction of Hong Pang's coal fired power plant in Tachileik (photo from Thailand's Manager newspaper, 25 Feb 2003)*

## Despite sanctions, UWSA businesses thrive in Tachileik

In January 2005, Wei Hsueh Kang and seven other UWSA leaders were indicted in the United States for drug trafficking. In November 2008, the US Treasury Department placed sanctions on 26 individuals, including Wei Hsueh Kang, and 17 companies for links to UWSA's drug trafficking network, including seven companies with the name Hong Pang.

Today many businesses in Tachileik are linked in one way or another to the UWSA, particularly hotel and entertainment venues. The popular 1G1 hotels have Wa backing, as indicated by their name (G being the 7th letter of the alphabet, referring to the UWSA's 171 Division).

Since 2019, the UWSA have been building an 18-storey luxury hotel and casino complex in the northern part of Tachileik. The Jing Lone entertainment complex will be the largest of its kind in Tachileik.



*Billboard advertising UWSA's planned Jing Lone casino complex in Tachileik*

## Manganese mining in eastern Shan State

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February 2021 production data on Burma's Mining Department website shows ten companies with permits to mine manganese dioxide. All are in Eastern Shan State, except for one in Tenasserim Region.

In Tachileik, manganese mining is taking place in Mong Ko tract, about 20 kilometers northeast of Tachileik town. According to local researchers, about 2,000 Lahu, Akha and Shan villagers have been impacted by mining in this area since 2007. Their lands have been seized, and their farms and water sources contaminated by mining waste<sup>6</sup>.

The nine companies listed in February 2021 with permits to mine for manganese dioxide in eastern Shan State are:

1. Sai Laung Hein Mining Co. Ltd.
2. Spring Fragrance (Nwe Oo Ya Nan) Co. Ltd.
3. Naung Tone Nagar Mining Co. Ltd.
4. San Par Ra Mi Mining Co. Ltd.
5. Hein Linn San Mining Co. Ltd.
6. Myint Oo Aung Co. Ltd.
7. Maha Shwe La Won Mining Co. Ltd.
8. Kyauk Saung Ni Co. Ltd.
9. Nant Youne Mining Co. Ltd.

The beneficial owners of the companies are unknown. Sai Laung Hein company was listed in the January 2020 Myanmar EITI report as failing to disclose its beneficial owners. The managing director of Sai Laung Hein company is U Tin Nwe, a former Burma Army officer.

On November 21, 2019, U Ohn Win, the Union Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation visited the manganese mines at Mong Ko, to inspect the worksites of two companies (Sai Laung Hein and Shwe Pyu Kaung Kin Nan Daw) which had applied to upgrade from small to medium-scale mining operations. According to a media report at that time, since the start of mining at Mong Ko, a total of 293,408 tons of manganese dioxide had been mined, earning 4,519,388 US dollars for the government<sup>7</sup>.



*Manganese mining in Mong Ko tract, Tachileik*

Timelapse images of manganese mining in Mong Ko tract, Tachileik



## Transport and export of manganese ore

Manganese ore is transported by trucks from Mong Ko tract, and stockpiled at a site next to a road about a mile east of Tachileik airport, from where it is transported by truck across the 2nd Friendship Bridge to Mae Sai in Thailand.

Thai customs figures at Mae Sai show manganese ore as one of the highest value imports from Burma at this border crossing<sup>8</sup>. Overall import figures from the Thai Department of Primary Industries and Mines show a huge increase in the volume of manganese ore imports into Thailand over the past ten years<sup>9</sup>.

| Imports of Manganese ore into Thailand | 2010  | 2019    |
|--|-------|---------|
| Quantity (tonnes)                      | 4,500 | 135,616 |
| Value (million baht)                   | 17.8  | 203.8   |



*Manganese stockpile area in Tachileik*



After being imported to Thailand, the ore is transported by truck down to Laem Chabang port, and then shipped to China. According to the Thai customs department, in May 2021, 574 tons of manganese ore were imported from Burma (at a value of approx. 1 million baht), and in the same month, 574 tons were exported to China (at a value of approx. 1.6 million baht)<sup>10</sup>.

Only two Thai companies, both based in Chiang Rai, have licenses to export manganese: Pakpoom Chiang Rai, and S. D. Yang Nua, whose office is in Mae Sai.

Timelapse images of manganese stockpile area near Tachileik



## Pollution from manganese production

### Water contamination

Excess levels of manganese in water can have harmful health impacts. A 2011 study in the USA showed intellectual impairment in school-age children exposed to manganese from drinking water<sup>11</sup>.

In June 2018, the Thai Provincial Waterworks Authority released a report on high levels of manganese content in the Ruak River, which supplies Mae Sai's water system<sup>12</sup>. This was making the water turbid and bad-smelling, and causing pipe blockages. The report also raised concerns about possible neurological disorders caused by manganese poisoning.



*Manganese mining in Mong Ko tract, Tachileik*

The contamination was measured at the Ko Chang pumping station, on the Ruak River about two kilometers downriver of the confluence of the Ruak and Mae Sai Rivers. The catchment area of the Ruak includes the Mong Ko manganese mining sites, as well as the manganese ore stockpile site east of Tachileik. It is thus very likely that the manganese contamination is coming from the manganese mining operations on the Burma side of the border.

The Burmese authorities appear to be aware of this issue. During his visit to Tachileik in November 2019, Minister U Ohn Win mentioned the importance of ensuring that manganese mining waste did not contaminate streams flowing into the Mae Sai River<sup>13</sup>.

Hong Pang's new manganese processing factory will be built directly beside the Ruak River, raising serious concerns about water contamination from factory waste and run-off from the manganese ore stored at the factory site.



*Ruak River*

## Air pollution

It is not known which type of manganese processing will take place at the planned factory near Tachileik, but it is expected to involve smelting in furnaces, which will release toxic fumes into the air, and impact the health of nearby communities.

A 1981 WHO study on the impacts of manganese<sup>14</sup> showed that air pollution from manganese processing factories in several countries caused high rates of serious respiratory infections, including pneumonia, among surrounding communities.

## Rubber production in Tachileik

Rubber started being planted on a large scale in eastern Shan State after 2000, in accordance with the military regime's aims to expand rubber cultivation under its 2000-2030 agricultural plan. It was also due to Chinese investors taking advantage of the Chinese government's subsidizing of rubber growing in Burma for opium crop substitution. The UWSA's Hong Pang company joined with Chinese investors in this program, including in the newly resettled southern Wa territories. Between 2000 and 2012, the acreage of rubber planted in eastern Shan State increased from 1,694 acres to 87,180 acres<sup>15</sup>.

Under the orders of the Burma Army and its militia allies, hill ranges across Tachileik were stripped and planted with rubber, destroying community forest resources and traditional upland farms. In 2006, the regime gave a permit to Yunnan Hongyu Group Company to grow 5,000 acres of rubber in Mong Phong tract of Tachileik. 17 villages in this area were forced by the Burma Army and local militia to clear and burn lands, and to plant rubber seedlings. Three Akha villages were forcibly relocated to make way for rubber plantations.<sup>16</sup>

Today, the hills around Tachileik are carpeted with mono-crop rubber plantations. The majority are owned by outside investors, who bring in migrant laborers from other parts of Burma to tend the trees and harvest the rubber. Locals therefore receive few benefits from this crop.

Latex harvested around Tachileik is currently only processed at a basic level to produce raw rubber sheets or blocks, which are transported by truck to Mong Yawng or Pa Liao-Keng Larb, and then shipped by boat up the Mekong River to China. The planned rubber crumb factory in Tachileik will be the first industrial rubber processing factory in the area.

## Concerns about pollution from rubber crumb factory

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The process of producing rubber crumb from latex involves shredding, washing, coagulating (with acid), re-shredding and drying. Large amounts of water will be needed for this, meaning a large outflow of waste water. Local villagers are fearful that contaminated water will flow directly into the Ruak River, causing damage to downstream farmlands and impacting the health of those relying on the water for household use.

The other main concern of local villagers is the potential foul smell, which will permeate surrounding residential areas, and have harmful health impacts.

A Thai government study in 2017<sup>17</sup> on impacts of two large rubber processing factories in Udon Thani province of Northeast Thailand revealed that air within a 5-kilometer radius of the factories contained chemical vapors up to 50 times over safe limits, causing respiratory inflammation, eye irritation, headaches and nausea. The study also mentioned that communities living up to 10 kilometers away from the factories complained of the smell.

This suggests that the smell from Hong Pang's new rubber factory may impact residents not only of Tachileik's eastern suburbs, but of the entire town and adjoining areas of Mae Sai in Thailand. The planned rubber factory will therefore threaten the life quality, health and tourist economy of the entire Tachileik-Mae Sai border area.

## Conclusion

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The SAC's backing of the UWSA's plans to build two polluting factories on unlawfully confiscated land near Tachileik is further evidence of the regime's contempt for the rights of local communities. It is also a worrying sign that further harmful concessions are in store, in return for the UWSA's continued political support after the coup.

The Hong Luek farmers have shown great bravery in defending their lands against such powerful interests. In opposing the factories, they are also defending the environment, health and livelihoods of thousands living on both sides of the border.

SHRF hopes that all communities in the Ruak river basin will support the struggle of the Hong Luek farmers, and urges the SAC and UWSA to immediately cancel these harmful factory projects and return the lands to their rightful owners.

## Endnotes

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