

Civil society groups demand halt to Hpakant jade mining



By Lun Min Mang | Wednesday, 23 March 2016

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Civil society organisations meeting in the Kachin State mining town of Hpakant have called for a suspension of all jade mining projects, saying the industry is costing lives, ruining the environment and fuelling conflict.



A worker digs for jade at a tailings pile in Hpakant township in May 2013. Photo: Kaung Htet / The Myanmar Times

“Until rules, laws and regulations are legislated and enacted, jade businesses and projects should be halted. [Proper policy guidelines](#), laws, mechanisms, and rules and regulations for the extractive industry should be legislated as fast as possible,” the groups said in a statement directed at the incoming NLD government.

Their call for a suspension of mining activities in Kachin State echoed a call for a moratorium on oil and gas production in Rakhine State that was issued yesterday by Arakan Oil Watch, an NGO that is campaigning for the [devolution of management and ownership of natural resources](#).

According to a report last year by Global Witness, an international non-profit organisation, Myanmar’s jade industry is [worth as much as US\\$31 billion a year](#) and is controlled by military elites, drug lords and cronies.

The NGOs meeting for two days in Hpakant slammed what they called the hostile and irresponsible behaviour of jade mining companies, and said [accidents last year](#) had caused more than 1000 casualties

among the tens of thousands of migrant workers who live illegally in makeshift camps, scavenging for valuable stones.

“Lawless behaviour of jade companies that carelessly locate waste mounds of earth, causing landslips which have often resulted in deaths, has to be stopped by taking severe legal action,” the statement said.

U La Tawng, a member of the Kachin Nation Social Development Foundation, said his home town of Hpakant was a lawless land where drugs can be bought without fear.

“Almost all houses in our ward have some involvement in the drug trade. We can see some people even dare inject the white powder into their arteries on the streets. There is no shame or fear,” he said.

He said the concentration of labour in Hpakant township had brought the drugs trade in its wake. He also believes that some jade companies are deeply involved in dealing in narcotics as the number of addicts continues to rise.

U La Tawng said the civil society groups called for legal measures to be taken by the new government led by U Htin Kyaw as well as parliament.

“Government has to take action against those companies,” said the statement, accusing businesses of not taking responsibility for accidents and injuries.

[Extensive extraction of jade](#) was turning the area into a wasteland, leading to a loss of water resources but also causing floods through deforestation, the statement said. “The activities of companies are in urgent need of strict scrutiny,” it added, calling for the establishment of an independent commission to investigate local grievances and bring cases to justice.

The vast profits of the jade industry are also fuelling conflict, the local groups said, referring to fighting between the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independence Army.

“Due to the profitable businesses, fighting has often happened in the township,” said U La Tawng.

U Dau Kha, a KIA spokesperson, told *The Myanmar Times* that the KIA is not directly involved in the extractive businesses, but he confirmed that the ethnic armed group collects tax from locals and businesses involved in the industry.

“I think fighting is inevitable when it [mining] happens. Those businesses are part of the reasons why we are fighting,” he said.

Global Witness said in its report [“Jade: Myanmar’s Big State Secret”](#) that the KIA made Hpakant a strategic target when conflict resumed in June 2011. Its success in raising millions of dollars in taxes from businesses led to a suspension of mining, ordered by the government, from May 2012 to September 2014, the report said.

U La Tawng said the profits from jade did not reach the local people and that the infrastructure of Hpakant township had not developed for years.