

ASIA PACIFIC

Myanmar Continues Search After Deadly Landslide at Jade Mine

By THOMAS FULLER NOV. 23, 2015

BANGKOK — It was known locally as Plastic Village, a sprawling encampment made from tarps and scraps of trash and inhabited by workers who scavenged for jade in the rugged hills of northern Myanmar.

Rescue workers on Monday continued to dig through the remnants of the encampment after a landslide over the weekend buried it along with at least 120 people.

The landslide was Myanmar's worst jade mining disaster in recent years, highlighting the primitive conditions of an industry that is highly lucrative but notorious for its secrecy and hazardous working conditions.

By Monday, about 120 bodies had been found since the landslide struck in the dead of night early Saturday, according to U Naw Land, the secretary of the Kachin National Social Development Foundation, a charitable organization that helped organize the rescue and recovery efforts.

"We can't say exactly how many, because some bodies did not come out as whole pieces," he said by telephone.

About 20 bodies were found on Monday alone, he said.

Another community leader involved in the rescue operation, U Dohtoi, said the number of bodies recovered had overwhelmed the hospital morgue in Hpakant, a commercial hub of the jade mining industry a half-hour drive away.

“This is the third day of digging out bodies, and the hospital has no more space,” he said. “So we are sending bodies directly to the cemetery now.”

Kachin State, a mountainous area of northern Myanmar, is home to the world’s most valuable jade, the green rock prized for its luster, especially in China, where most of it ends up. The area is convulsed by fighting between troops from the central government and ethnic Kachin rebels, who are seeking more autonomy as well as income from jade, timber and other natural resources in the state.

The jade mines, off limits to outsiders and often controlled by shadowy companies with links to the heroin and methamphetamine trades, produce mountains of waste that are deposited by the truckload at dumping sites.

The landslide on Saturday occurred at one of those sites. The inhabitants of Plastic Village, most of them workers from other parts of the country, scavenged for the bits of jade that the large companies had not harvested. They lived and worked on top of the waste pile.

A worker who survived, Arkar, 21, said he heard a tremendous noise, “like thunder,” when the landslide struck. He escaped because his tent was on the edge of Plastic Village.

The encampment was not authorized but tolerated by officials, who imposed an informal tax on what the scavengers found, according to residents.

“We were not allowed to stay there,” said Arkar, who goes by one name. “But it’s an easy way to make money, even if it is so dangerous.”

The scavengers sold the jade to traders in Mandalay, a major center in

Myanmar for polishing and trading the stones.

Rescuers said that there were about 70 or 80 dwellings in Plastic Village and that each shack typically housed three or four people.

Landslides are common in the open-pit jade mines, especially during the monsoon season, when downpours loosen the soil.

“Landslides are regular nightmares here,” said U Tin Soe, a resident of Hpakant. After one landslide in October, monsoon rains prevented rescuers from recovering bodies. “The victims were just left forgotten under the waste forever,” Mr. Tin Soe said.

The power of the landslides was captured in a rare video posted by Radio Free Asia this year that showed large earth-moving equipment being buried by a tide of sludge. Workers are seen sprinting up a hill to avoid being swept away. An unknown number of people were killed in the landslide, which occurred in April.

In contrast with the mining of diamonds and other precious stones, there has been little consumer activism over the conditions in the jade industry, partly because the main customers are in China, where civic activism is circumscribed.

“There are few examples as yet of Chinese consumers trying to take action on this,” said Mike Davis, Asia director for Global Witness, an organization based in London that researches environmental issues and corruption. “Awareness seems to be low.”

Global Witness released a report last month that estimated that Myanmar sold \$31 billion worth of jade in 2014. The report detailed connections between the jade industry and former generals as well as links to the illicit drug trade.

U Win Myo Thu, a researcher at EcoDev, an organization based in

Myanmar that focuses on natural resources, blamed the Ministry of Mining for the recurrent landslides. “The ministry is too weak to control the big companies,” he said.

“Like the blood diamonds of Africa, this is Myanmar’s blood jade crisis,” he added.

Officials at the Ministry of Mining in the capital, Naypyidaw, declined to comment on Saturday’s landslide.

“I cannot address this issue,” said U Thant Zaw Oo, a director. “I don’t have the authority.”

Saw Nang contributed reporting from Mandalay, Myanmar, and Wai Moe from Yangon, Myanmar.

A version of this article appears in print on November 24, 2015, on page A4 of the New York edition with the headline: Myanmar Continues Search After Fatal Jade Mine Landslide .