

Myanmar's jade bounty is disappearing 'in front of our eyes': Hpakant MP



By Chan Mya Htwe | Thursday, 10 March 2016

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U Tint Soe, the new lower house MP for Hpakant township, discusses his frustration with Chinese lawbreakers, large-scale excavation, narcotics, landslides, environmental damage and the finite nature of jade resources.



Diggers operate on the hillside in Hpakant jade mining areas. Photo: AFP

How can the new government tackle problems in the Hpakant jade mining area?

We will watch the companies and try to control them according to the laws. One important thing to note is that the [jade market is terrible](#). A stone that used to be worth K10 million is now worth less than K1 million. Demand and supply are out of line – demand is falling but [jade is being extracted](#) from the ground with huge machines.

It should not be like this. It no longer seems like companies are mining for jade, but mining for pebbles. Jade production in our country is a [huge business](#). On the other hand, when crooks control the market in China, prices fall. Jade is not something we can re-plant, it takes millions of years to form. If we continue to extract as much as we can we will end up with nothing.

We already have policies in place to protect the area, so we can try to control the companies using the existing laws.

A special team including the vice minister for home affairs went to Hpakant to [examine rumours](#) that a large number of dump trucks were being brought across the border illegally. What were the results of the investigation?

I was also involved in the search to find the machinery and examine the companies, as were other National League for Democracy members. I caught companies red-handed, disposing of the vehicles behind piles of tailings that they had dumped illegally. The companies said they planned to get licences, and gave excuses. Their words lacked conviction but we have been unable to do anything about it.

There have been many events like this. Many companies are hiding vehicles, and we have lots of evidence. But collecting evidence is different to taking action. Our goal is to ensure proper revenues for the state. For the moment we just want to find out as much information as possible.

Though I wish it did, the mining law does not include specific details about the power of machines or how many vehicles and dump trucks should be used at each work site. But with so many huge machines at the mines our supply of jade will run out quickly, that much is obvious. Each generation has a duty to preserve the things left by its ancestors. Jade mining operations are having a huge environmental impact.

Do you have plans to limit the machinery used in Hpakant's jade mines?

We have to. I have been in Hpakant for 28 years. This is happening in front of our eyes. It cannot carry on indefinitely. In the past we watched and did nothing - now we need to do something. This heavy machinery can excavate as much jade in one month as 50 years of digging could produce in the past. I dare not think too hard about it. Despite all of this production, the country is still not benefiting.

The only people who are benefiting, or taking profit, are foreign investors masquerading as Myanmar ethnic people. As locals, we all know about this. For example, even though we think the sales price of jade at the [Myanma Gems Emporium](#) [in Nay Pyi Taw] is expensive, we have never seen the most precious stones, which are sent illegally to China and do not reach markets in Myanmar.

The priceless gems are sent to markets in places like Guangzhou, in a number of different ways. The companies can carry jade illegally because their parent companies are Chinese. We should seriously forbid this from happening, so that there are no illegal outflows from our country. I want everyone to know that the income from jade trading should be financing our country.

How will you handle the [illegal jade trade](#) with China?

Hpakant is the main place where the issues, difficulties and problems from the whole of Myanmar are combined. Problems with narcotics and migrant workers are inextricable from problems with jade. It is difficult to decide which one to solve first when we have to solve them all.

Our main objectives are to fulfil the fundamental needs of those living nearby, to secure their lives and their properties. We have a responsibility for all of them. Particularly we must solve the problem of migrant labourers being [killed when searching for raw stones](#). There is so much that you have not seen or heard. According to reports, [114 people died](#) in a recent landslide. That figure conceals the real number of deaths.

People from all across Myanmar travel to Hpakant to search for uncut stones and they often face death while searching through jade mine tailings. As a local Pyithu Hluttaw MP, how will you ensure such cases do not happen?

Accidental death is [not unusual](#) in Hpakant. If there are one or two deaths, the police don't even

investigate. The number of deaths due to traffic accidents and landslides are too high. The main reason for this is poverty. People in such poverty who believe they can make money don't care about the dangers they face. This is one of our challenges.

We plan to do something to protect the rights of itinerant jade hunters. They should have the right to search freely. We are now working out how to [reduce the height](#) of tailings piles for their safety.

How to you plan to [target foreign investment](#) under the names of Myanmar people?

The responsible people from our government departments know exactly who works for which company, and who is doing what. Behind the companies are gangs and armed groups, especially those who launder drugs money. The officials know all about them, but they close their eyes, as it is also stated in the [Global Witness report](#) [published last year]. We know what is happening but we have not taken much action. It is rather difficult.

How many foreigners are mining in Hpakant under the names of Myanmar people?

It is difficult to say exactly. But as most people know, 95 percent of the companies here are owned primarily by Chinese investors. Even the supervisors of lower-rank workers are [mostly Chinese](#). Only they could do that job. Chinese businesspeople join with privileged people from Myanmar – mostly officers. We see this again and again.

According to our law, only Myanmar citizens can mine in Hpakant. Chinese nationals with Myanmar citizenship are running the businesses, but behind them are Chinese companies. Without doubt – some of the backers stay in the shadows, others are more visible. It is illegal. But before we do anything, we need to discuss this with all related stakeholders. So it is difficult for me to say any more about it.

Do you have a plan to raise these issues in the new parliament?

Yes, of course. I plan to take action as required, after negotiating with local residents and business people, or to amend or enact the necessary laws.

My main intention is to settle all the problems together. If jade mining continues without any regulation in Hpakant, the precious stone will soon disappear, as it has in [Mogok](#) and Mineshu. All the locals are concerned about it.

The state, civil society and local people all need to conserve this resource as their national duty. Because of the mining, local people have suffered from the environmental impact. Our region is facing climate change now. We have faced flooding and drought even though it is a land abundant in springs.

Translation by Emoon and San Lay