

Land confiscation has increased dramatically in Arakan State in western Burma as a result of increased military deployment, according to a report released on Monday by the All Arakan Students' and Youth Congress (AAYSC).

The Burmese junta has deployed more troops in order to provide increased security at a number of governmental developments projects such as the Shwe Gas pipeline and hydro-power projects in western Burma.

Situated on the Bay of Bengal, Arakan State enjoys an abundance of natural resources which which accounts for the high level of land confiscation, the report said.

Most of the land confiscation is in conjunction with development projects by foreign countries. The troops are there "to ensure the unopposed exploitation of natural resources," said the report.

"The military government wants to develop more projects in Arakan State at an increased rate, and they don't care about the human rights of the local people," said Aung Marn Oo of the AASYC. "More and more troops will be deployed in the future, and we are going to see increased land confiscation, forced labor and human rights abuses against the local people."

Since 1988, the number of infantry battalions based in Arakan State and Paletwa Township of Chin State has increased from 3 to 43 battalions, said the AASYC..

Land confiscation has also taken place in order to build barracks, military outposts and training sites for troops. Land is also confiscated for farming in order to provide rations and generate extra income for the military.

Many local businesses suffered last year when authorities ordered them to relocate their operations to a designated 515-acre "industrial zone." The majority of the businesses were unable to efficiently transfer their operations because of a lack of electricity, water and infrastructure in the zone.

Construction of the Shwe Gas pipeline through the area is a major concern for human rights groups, who believe that land confiscation will increase.

The Shwe Gas Movement (SGM) reports that close to 44 battalions have already been deployed around the pipeline in Arakan State. Twenty-two townships will be affected, it said.

Although four hydro-power projects are being built in Arakan State, most of the electricity will be sold to Bangladesh or used for military consumption.

Another concern cited in the report is the regime's plan to plant 8 million acres of jatropha and castor oil plants.

In 2008, Light Infantry Battalion No 542 forced villagers to plant 48,000 castor oil plants on 40 acres of former grazing land in the Chaung-wa village tract.

The local authorities have also leased out paddy land to Bangladesh, which has deprived local farmers of land they have lived on for years and affected the already poor food situation in Arakan State.

The Asian Human Right Commission reported that Burma has experienced an increased food shortage as a direct result of militarization. As the number of military checkpoints increased, so does unofficial taxing of money and food.

Another concern is the construction of the Kaladan Multi-Model Transit Transport Facility, planned to start in late 2010. The US \$120 million seaport-highway project, which the Indian government is financing, will be developed in a highly populated residential area near Sittwe, which includes the area's only major hospital.

According to AASYC, more than 200 acres of farmland was recently confiscated from locals for the deployment of artillery battalions No. 375 and 377 in Kyauk Taw Township, which is where the highway will link India and the seaport.

Foreign oil exploration in Arakan State has also led to land confiscation and increased hardships for the local people, as they rarely receive compensation, the report said.

Since 2008, India's Essar Oil Ltd. has been drilling near Sittwe. According to local people, rice fields, shrimp farms and plantations have been destroyed due to seismic surveying last year. Some of local residents were forcibly hired for construction jobs but received no regular wages, sources said.

"The foreign companies from Bangladesh, China, India come to Arakan State to exploit the resources but don't pay attention to the suffering their operations create for the local people," said Aung Marn Oo.

The report noted that Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has the right to own property as well as associate with others," and "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of their property."

However, Article 18 of the 1974 Constitution of Burma, in a State Fundamental Principle, says, "The State is the ultimate owner of all natural resources above and below the ground, above and beneath the waters and in the atmosphere, and also of all the lands."

The AASYC was formed in 1994 by Arkanese pro-democracy activists.