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New report shows Malaysian-backed palm oil project damages the environment, grabs land and violates indigenous rights in a Myanmar conflict zone

The notorious palm oil industry has expanded to Myanmar, with more than 1.8 million acres of oil palm concessions awarded in Tanintharyi Region in southern Myanmar. A new report, released today, in Yangon, documents how one of these oil palm projects is fueling environmental and social harm. The report, *Green Desert: Communities in Tanintharyi Renounce the MSPP Oil Palm Concession*, examines the impacts of the Malaysian-backed Myanmar Stark Prestige Plantation (MSPP) in Tanintharyi Township, Myeik District. *Green Desert* is available for download in both Burmese and English at www.flegt-alarm.org. This report highlights severe issue with land concessions and conflict areas that have implications for all of Myanmar and investors in such projects.

MSPP is a \$36.75 million joint venture between Malaysia-based Prestige Platform, a subsidiary of Glenealy Plantations and Samling Group, and Myanmar-based Stark Industries, owned by Mya Thida Sway Tin who is said to have close links with key figures from the previous military regime. Samling Group is largely financed by Maybank (a large Malaysian Bank) – which in turn receives financing from the Norwegian Government Pension Fund, Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), and several European and North American funds. Samling's palm oil projects have previously been decried for environmental crimes and human rights violations, and its venture in Myanmar is no exception. The MSPP concession awarded in 2011 also overlaps with the proposed boundary of Tanintharyi National Park – allowing the company to clear-cut forests of high conservation priority.

“It appears that the ministries have no collaboration among each other when they classify land use. Land where four villages have been for 100 years is used for an agriculture plantation mega investment, while another ministry is proposing a national park exactly the same place. It is alarming that no ministry is going down for actual land use checking before they classify the land.” Naw Pe Tha Law, Tar Ka Paw

MSPP is operating in an area that has seen more than six decades of civil war. Myanmar military offensives have forced indigenous Karen villagers to flee their homes time and time again, and hide out as Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in the forest or nearby villages. Now, just as these IDPs have had the opportunity to return home and start rebuilding their communities, MSPP has grabbed their lands out from under them. The palm oil project is located on land belonging to four indigenous Karen villages, home to approximately 4,480 people. Since 2011, the company has cleared more than 6,000 acres including betel nut and cashew orchards that villagers depend on for their livelihoods. Many families now face debt or are forced to work as day laborers for low wages. Many villagers do not earn enough money to feed and clothe their families. Run-off from chemical fertilizers and pesticides used by MSPP has polluted local water sources and villagers have suffered from skin irritations and other health issues and have seen their livestock die off. This is a violation of Myanmar's own environmental laws and the Karen community's right to Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

“Before, during the time of fighting, we could flee to the jungle, but we always had our land to return to. Now there is peace, they have taken our land and we have nothing left” Villager from Thein Pyin

“Before we sold betel nuts and could support the whole family and we owned own land. We didn't have to worry how big our families are. Now we worry every day.” Villager from Baw SaNway



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Green Desert urges MSPP to **cease all operations** until land conflicts are resolved, appropriately compensate affected villagers for previous impacts, and **carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)**. The report also calls on relevant financial institutions to ensure that they are not invested in MSPP. Based on its findings of the MSPP project, the report recommends a **moratorium on all oil palm expansion in the Tanintharyi Region** until appropriate safeguards for human rights and the environment are put in place.

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