The Myanmar authorities must immediately halt operations at a giant copper mine co-owned by a Chinese company and the Myanmar military, which continues to be plagued by human rights abuses, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

The Letpadaung mine is operated by Wanbao Mining, a subsidiary of NORINCO, a Chinese state-owned conglomerate with interests in arms manufacturing and mining – and began shipping copper in September 2016.

With Myanmar breaking free of decades-long sanctions, and with the new government led by Aung San Suu Kyi seeking a massive increase in foreign investment, the report outlines the perils of large-scale projects when companies that commit human rights abuses are not held to account.

The report, *[Mountain of Trouble: Human Rights Abuses Continue at Myanmar’s Letpadaung Mine](https://amnesty.app.box.com/files/0/f/18617613151/1/f_133100776994" \t "_blank)*, reveals how thousands of families living near the Letpadaung mine risk losing their homes or farmland as the operations expand, how the threat of environmental disaster looms over an area prone to earthquakes and floods, and how the authorities continues to use repressive laws to harass activists and villagers opposed to the mine.

“Myanmar desperately needs big business projects like the Letpadaung mine to succeed. But these should not come at the cost of local communities. The government needs to intervene and suspend operations until all human rights and environmental concerns are properly investigated and addressed,” said Mark Dummett, Amnesty International’s researcher on Business and Human Rights.

**Thousands at risk of forced evictions**

The report reveals that thousands of people living close to the mine continue to be at risk of being forcibly evicted from their homes and/or their farmland. The operator Myanmar Wanbao Mining Copper Limited (Myanmar Wanbao), a fully owned subsidiary of Wanbao Mining, says it plans to expand the mine’s perimeter by a further two thousand acres which includes the homes of 141 families in four villages. The company has not given a date for its planned acquisition let alone other details.

Myanmar Wanbao claims to have conducted genuine consultations with all the affected people, but Amnesty International researchers found that this was not the case. For example, the residents of the four villages due for complete relocation have been excluded from all the consultations altogether, even though they are among the worst affected. Against their wishes, they face the loss of their farms and resettlement to a new location.

“Myanmar Wanbao continues to make claims about how it has consulted all affected people, but our research found that these claims are simply not true. The company seems to be more interested in public relations than in genuinely ensuring that the rights of the neighbouring communities are respected,” said Amnesty International’s Mark Dummett.

Amnesty International wrote to Wanbao outlining its findings and seeking an explanation but did not receive a reply.

**“Every crop perished”**

The Letpadaung mine is situated on the flood plain of the Chindwin River  and in an area prone to earthquakes. If either a flood or an earthquake strikes, contaminated waste could be unleashed into the local community. Myanmar Wanbao has acknowledged the potentially “catastrophic” impact of such a leak, but has failed to carry out an adequate environmental assessment. Such a lack of assessment leaves the local communities at great risk.

One incident shows the hazardous effects of leaving local communities unprotected. Amnesty International discovered that in November 2015, a waste leak from the mine ran into people’s fields in Wet Hme village for weeks without being addressed by Myanmar Wanbao.

As one farmer told Amnesty International following the leak:

“Every crop perished. Everything died. Every place where the water got the crops perished. They perished steadily, taking around ten days. First the crops wilted and then died.”

Myanmar Wanbao remains silent about the spill, denying the villagers information about its cause, the content of the waste liquid, or whether it posed any health risks. The company has not cleaned up the area or compensated villagers for the devastation of their crops.

**Repression of peaceful protests**

Despite promises to resolve issues between Myanmar Wanbao and the local communities, the Myanmar authorities have continued to subject the villagers who oppose the mine to arrest and harassment.

Invoking a slew of draconian laws the Myanmar authorities have continued to block protests, arrest and prosecute people for exercising their right to peaceful assembly.

Several villagers are facing prosecution and possible imprisonment for taking part in protests. For instance, two women from Thone village are currently facing charges of “mischief causing damage” and “defamation” despite the fact that the protests were peaceful.

Three men have also been found guilty of taking part in a demonstration outside the main gate of the Sabetaung and Kyisintaung (S&K) mine, which is close to the Letpadaung mine and is also operated by Wanbao Mining. The men deny the charges – blocking the main gate and trespassing on company property – that they were convicted of.

In addition, no officials have been held accountable for the use of incendiary white phosphorus munitions – launched from Myanmar Wanbao’s compound - against peaceful protesters in November 2012 nor for the death of Daw Khin Win, a woman villager who was shot and killed by the police while taking part in a protest in 2014.

“Instead of holding the officials accountable for the use of white phosphorus and the death a protestor, the authorities are punishing the victims. Using crude and repressive laws, they are harassing, monitoring and prosecuting people who are only asking for justice,” said Mark Dummett.

The organisation is also calling for the Myanmar government to improve the regulation of large investment projects, such as mines, and put in place an adequate framework for land acquisition that is based on international standards on the right to adequate housing and the prohibition of forced evictions.

Amnesty International is also calling on foreign states, including China, to ensure that if their companies  are doing business, or planning to do business, in Myanmar they put effective measures in place to ensure that their operations do not result in human rights abuses. All foreign corporations should conduct human rights due diligence on their planned business activities in Myanmar in line with international standards.

**Background**

The report shows that in the two years since Amnesty International first exposed a range of serious human rights abuses, some dating back decades, at the Monywa copper project, which contains the Letpadaung mine and the S&K mine, little has been done to address the issues. The project is owned by Chinese company Wanbao Mining, together with the military-owned Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (UMEHL) and the Myanmar government.

Amnesty International collected and tested soil samples from the area of the waste leak, which indicated that the waste water was contaminated with various metals, in particular arsenic, copper and lead. The samples were then tested at the Greenpeace laboratory at Exeter University in the UK. An environmental scientist concluded that the liquid had a high probability of being contaminated.

The environmental scientist told Amnesty International:

“The soil samples indicate that the waste water in the drain at the time of the spill had elevated levels of various metals and in particular arsenic, copper and lead. This indicates that contamination of the water with mine-derived contaminants is highly probable.”

Amnesty International’s 2015 report, *Open for Business? Corporate Crimes and Abuses at Myanmar Copper Mine* (available at[https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa16/0003/2015/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa16/0003/2015/en/" \t "_blank)) exposed how the Monywa project has been characterised by serious human rights abuses and a lack of transparency since its inception and throughout its various changes in ownership.