

Kawthoolei Land Seminar Statement 'Towards Land Security, Peace and Prosperity in Kawthoolei'

November 4 2017

The Kawthoolei Land Seminar, held from November 2 to 4, 2017 at Law Khee Lar of the Karen National Union (KNU) Pa-an District, was attended by 373 representatives from 53 organizations. The representatives held discussions on the land problems and challenges faced by the entire people of Karen State; the Kawthoolei land policy, land management and matters relating to resolution of land problems, in order to strengthen further the cooperation among the KNU, the local populations and civil society organizations.

Current Myanmar government laws relating to land, enacted since 2012, including the Farmland Law and the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law, the Special Economic Zone Law, and the Investment Law, have threatened the daily livelihood of the Karen people, and could further increase disputes in political dialogues.

Taking advantage of the ceasefire and peace process, many investors are entering with mega projects for extracting natural resources and earmarking hundreds of acres of agricultural land for monoculture and investing in mega structural projects in Karen State opposite eastern Bago Region and in the Taninthayi Region. These investments represent attempts by the Myanmar government to extend its control and sovereignty and at the same time, they have caused serious social effects to the people and damage to the environment.

In addition to the increased flood of business investments in natural resource extraction, Karen State and Taninthayi Region are seeing a rise in big conservation projects and initiatives that likewise become the means by which the Myanmar Government is exerting control over Karen territory. These initiatives are also portraying villagers as "forest destroyers" and as contributing to climate change through customary practices in order to justify enclosing the forests and excluding people.

These kinds of big business investments in natural resource extraction and the big conservation and forest preservation expansion initiatives pose serious threats to the lifeblood of the people and their land, forests, waters, fisheries, grazing land and lives and livelihoods. and culture and identity that depend on these. While at the same time the above mentioned developments expand the administrative areas of the Myanmar Government.

In response to these threats and problems, there must be full and meaningful recognition in law and in practice for the customary land tenure and related customary practices of the Karen people, including the right to land for IDPs and

refugees for their return and actualization of their right to land. IDPs and refugees must have the right to return voluntarily, in security, to their original habitats with dignity, reclaim the ownership of homes and lands and resettle on the lands.

The current Myanmar Government's Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law contradicts the KNU land policy and customary land management and practices of the people, therefore the law must be abolished.

The participants of the seminar urge the KNU for the realization of Kawthoolei land policy and land management system, which have been formulated by the KNU and accepted by the people through a process of extensive consultation with communities throughout Kawthoolei.

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