



Press Release: Conservation Alliance Tanawthari (CAT), 16 July, 2018

Global Environment Facility conservation project in Myanmar violates indigenous rights

On 16 July, 2018 the Conservation Alliance Tanawthari (CAT) submitted a formal complaint concerning the violation of Karen indigenous peoples' right to Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Ridge to Reef conservation project in Tanintharyi Region, Myanmar. This enormous conservation project threatens the land and resource rights of thousands of Karen indigenous people. An inception workshop is planned for Ridge to Reef on 17 July, but local indigenous communities have not been consulted. CAT is calling for GEF to suspend Ridge to Reef until a comprehensive FPIC process is carried out with all communities who will be affected by the project. "Implementing Ridge to Reef without FPIC is a serious violation of indigenous peoples' rights and GEF safeguards," said CAT coordinator Naw Eh Htee Wah. CAT's complaint to GEF is available at:

<https://www.iccaconsortium.org/index.php/2018/07/13/stop-the-ridge-to-reef-project-in-burma-myanmar/>

Ridge to Reef is a \$21 million (US) project that covers 1.452 million hectares, which is roughly one third of the total area of Tanintharyi Region. The project aims to expand protected areas in the region, such as establishing Lenya National Park (LNP), which risks excluding indigenous Karen people from their ancestral territories. "If the national park comes, how will we survive?" said Lenya community leader Saw Min Yin. Furthermore, the project threatens the rights of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) to return to their old lands in the region. CAT calls for GEF to suspend Ridge to Reef until substantial guarantees are put in place for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of all those who have been displaced by civil war.

CAT calls on GEF and other responsible parties to support the existing initiatives of indigenous communities to protect their lands and resources according to customary systems. Rather than supporting top down conservation initiatives, GEF and responsible parties must take an alternative approach – one that centers around the rights of indigenous people to manage and protect their forests and resources. "Karen communities in Tanintharyi Region are already active in conserving their own natural resources, so the international community must recognize and support their efforts" said CAT member and Southern Youth Director Saw San Ngwe.

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Editor's notes:

Conservation Alliance Tanawthari (CAT) was founded in 2014 as a coalition of Karen community organizations working in the region. CAT aims to promote conservation of biodiversity together with people, and protect the rights of indigenous communities. CAT member organizations:

1. Tenasserim River & Indigenous People Networks (TRIP NET)
2. Community Sustainable Livelihood and Development (CSLD)
3. Tarkapaw Youth Group (TKP)
4. Candle Light (CL)
5. Southern Youth (SY)
6. Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) is a multi-lateral funding body which is administered by the World Bank to address global environmental issues.

Ridge to Reef: Integrated Protected Area Land and Seascape Management in Tanintharyi is a GEF funded project implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in partnership with the Myanmar Forest Department, Department of Fisheries, Tanintharyi Regional Government, Fauna and Flora International (FFI), and Smithsonian Institution.

Tanintharyi Region, located in Southeast Myanmar is an ecologically, politically and socially diverse landscape. Tanintharyi's terrestrial landscape is home to one of Southeast Asia's largest areas of low elevation evergreen forests, which is inhabited by indigenous Karen communities who have stewarded these lands and forests for generations. A ceasefire signed in 2012 has halted nearly seventy years of civil war between the Karen National Union and the central Myanmar government. The cessation of armed conflict in Tanintharyi has propelled an explosion of land-based investments, which present significant threats to the environment and indigenous communities who depend on it. In an effort to counter the environmental damage caused by development projects, large top-down conservation projects led by INGOs and the Myanmar government are now being planned and conducted without the consultation of local communities. This presents a new set of challenges for indigenous communities who are still recovering from decades of military hostilities. See CAT's recent report, *Our Forest, Our Life*, available at <http://www.theborderconsortium.org/news/conservation-the-right-to-return/>