



## Dams, Drugs, and Democracy

### The Struggle for Resources in Kachin State

2013 • Running time 83 minutes • Directed by Andrew Limon and Jack Aung • Distributed by [damsdrugsanddemocracy.com](http://damsdrugsanddemocracy.com)

This compelling documentary places Myanmar's Myitsone Dam in the context of the Kachin insurgency, which has ravaged the country for more than five decades in the struggle to control the region's rich resources. Over the course of four years, a team of local journalists lived with villagers displaced by the dam project. They followed dam protesters and interviewed key players: local politicians, insurgent leaders, independent observers, and those behind the delayed Myitsone Dam project. All this comes at a time of significant political and societal change in Myanmar.

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# Dams, Drugs & Democracy



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## WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

I selected this film because it shows the interrelations between religion and many other facets of global development: hydropower projects, resource extraction, population displacement, drug addiction, war, venture capital efforts, military rule, and democracy, as well as Myanmar's foreign relations, especially with China. I am struck by how well the documentary integrates all these themes.

## SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

|              |               |                  |
|--------------|---------------|------------------|
| Activism     | Development   | Mining           |
| Asian        | Government    | Political        |
| Studies      | Environmental | Science          |
| Buddhism     | Studies       | Religion         |
| Christianity | Ethnography   | Water Management |
| Dams         | Insurgency    |                  |

## SYNOPSIS

*Dams, Drugs, and Democracy: The Struggle for Resources in Kachin State* tells the story of a controversial plan to dam the Irrawaddy River at its origin, the convergence of two rivers in Myanmar's northern Kachin state. Local villagers have been forcibly relocated, disrupting their traditional way of life. The impact on downstream areas in the rest of the country is potentially enormous, prompting popular protest. Most of the electricity from the gigantic hydropower project was intended for neighboring China, so a sudden halt in construction has geopolitical ramifications.

The film places the Myitsone Dam in the context of the Kachin insurgency, which has ravaged the country for more than five decades in the struggle to control the region's rich resources. Over the course of four years, a team of local journalists lived with villagers displaced by the dam project, followed dam protesters, and interviewed key players, including local politicians, insurgent leaders, independent observers, and those behind the delayed Myitsone Dam project.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

Different environmental, social, and political impacts, both on ethnic Kachin people and others, are woven together to show how, as a result of a large-scale hydroelectric project, people are relocated, are led into financial dispossession, and fall into drug addiction.

## A COMMENT FROM THE FILMMAKERS

The co-director of the film, Andrew Limon, provided the following observation about environmental justice in Myanmar: "In the film, we mention various resources that have been exploited in Kachin in the past and present, including jade, gold, timber—and even people. China, along with the Burmese military and other powerful players, has historically extracted these resources by force. In China's case, a lot of these resources were carried across the border with very little thought about the social and environmental impacts on the local area. Water and hydropower are also resources, but they are much harder to exploit by force or coercion because the consent of the sovereign nation and, to a certain extent, the local communities, is required to successfully build and operate a dam."



## BACKGROUND

Contemporary Myanmar is bordered to the west by Bangladesh and India, by China to the north, by Laos to the northeast, and by Thailand to the east and south. Its population of about 55 million people speaks dozens of languages, mostly belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family. Myanmar is home to just as many ethnic groups, many of whom live in the hill regions surrounding the fertile lowland river valleys. Ethnic Burmans, living mostly in the lowland areas, are predominantly Buddhist and constitute about 80% to 85% of the population. The remainder of Myanmar's population includes a great diversity of ethnic groups, such as the Mon, Shan, Karen, Pa'O, Chin, Kachin, Wa, Naga, Rakhine, and Rohingya, as well as diverse groups of Indian and Chinese descent. Since independence from colonial rule after World War II, the country's national development and integration have remained fraught with tensions and fault lines, as many groups—Buddhist and non-Buddhist, Burmese and non-Burmese—have sought greater autonomy and/or continue to feel excluded from equal access to power and resources, both natural and economic. The documentary about the Myitsone Dam project and how it was stopped highlights one of the flashpoints the country has faced in its attempts to develop economically and emerge from decades of ethnic insurgency and conflict, military rule, and economic stagnation.

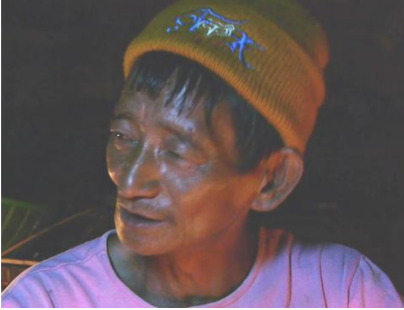


## KEY LOCATIONS AND PEOPLE

Myitsone Dam (a project of China Power Investment Corporation, or CPI)  
Kachin state, Northern Myanmar  
Tang Hpre village, northern Kachin state  
Aung Myin Thar, a resettlement village in northern Kachin state  
Myitkyina, capital of Kachin state  
Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) headquarters in Laiza, Myanmar, on the China-Myanmar border



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Kachin IDP (internally displaced person) camp, location unspecified  
Yangon, former capital of Myanmar  
Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon

**Daw Seng Hkawng** – a woman who runs a restaurant

**Share Gum Ja** – an older man whose mother and wife have died

**Gum An Tu** – a gold miner

**Ye Htut Kaung** – a leader of the protest from Yangon to Myitsone

**Lamai Gum Mai** – a Kachin IDP

**Maran Seng Li, Awng Lum** – “Blast” band anti-dam activists and musicians

**Manual laborer** – an unnamed heroin addict

**Brang Nu** – a Baptist pastor in Tang Hpre

**U Tay Seinna** – the abbot of a Buddhist temple in Aung Myin Thar

**Dr. Nicholas Farrelly** – a fellow in Australian National University’s College of Asia and the Pacific

**Professor U Maung Maung Aye** – the chief advisor at the Myanmar Environmental Institute

**Dr. Manam Tu Ja** – a politician and former leader of the KIO

**Professor U Hkapara Khun Awng** – a Peace-Talk Creation Group representative

**General Gun Maw** – the vice-chief of staff of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA)

**Li Guanghua** – the president of the Upstream Ayeyawady Confluence Basin Hydropower

## FILM CHAPTERS OR SEQUENCES

### 00:00 Opening

Comments by Hillary Clinton, President Obama, U Thein Sein (president of Myanmar), Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Nobel Prize laureate), and a narrator. A Burmese proverb dealing with what gets trampled (*myeza* grass) when water buffalo fight is also provided. Here, the *myeza* grass seems to be a reference to the common people.

### 02:25 Myitsone, Tang Hpre Village, Northern Kachin State

Three snapshots of daily life from the perspectives of Daw Seng Hkawng, Share Gum Ja, and Gum An Tu, who are featured at various points in the film.

### 09:45 Contextualizing the Problem

A discussion of China, the Irrawaddy River, Myanmar’s resources and cultures, and assessments of the project’s impact. Featured are Dr. Nicholas Farrelly, Professor U Maung Maung Aye, and Li Guanghua, plus a promotional video courtesy of CPI.

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## 15:55 Aung Myin Thar, Resettlement Village

Commentary by Li Guanghua. Shift to scene at one of the five churches constructed for the community, Seng Hkawng's new house, and footage of a neighboring house in the rainy season. The narrator and then Dr. Farrelly contextualize the postponement of the dam's construction.



## 20:20 Myitkyina, Capital of Kachin State

"Blast" band anti-dam activists and musicians Maran Seng Li and Awng Lum discuss a song that reveals the truth of the situation. They sing the song and then comment on their roles in helping to stop the dam.

## 23:15 Resettlement Villages/Tang Hpre

Because of hardships many people moved back to Tang Hpre, even though it was illegal to do so. Scenes of local villagers starting to pan for gold, which is also illegal and potentially harmful to their health. At a Baptist church in Tang Hpre, a teacher and students recite nationalistic verses in honor of National Day. A pastor highlights the connections between the dam, gold mining, and drugs.

## 32:45 A Wasteland Near Myitkyina

A manual laborer shoots heroin and talks with the film crew. Scene turns to Seng Hkwang, who talks about her husband's heroin use and the downturn for her family. A narrator notes Myanmar's place in the global production of heroin.

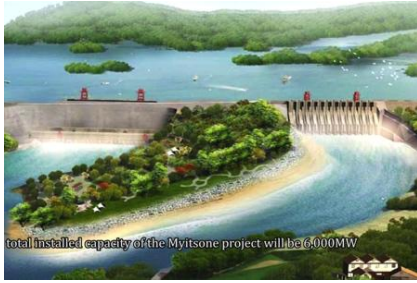
## 35:10 China's Energy Security

Dr. Farrelly discusses China's energy security concerns and how they loom large relative to Kachin state. Attention turns to a conference in Yangon, Myanmar's former capital, where Li Guanghua of CPI makes a case for continuing the dam project, calling attention to the 10 principles of the UN Global Compact, among other matters.

## 37:30 A Protest Gathering and March

A protest gathering against the dam at the Shwedagon Pagoda, Myanmar's holiest site. Since colonial times, the temple has been at times the site of political protest and expression. The protesters then march from Yangon to the site of the Myitsone Dam, 1,200 kilometers away. Featured is a protest song emphasizing the writing of "a new history with our blood" and chants against the Asia World Company and CPI. Ye Htut Kaung, a leader of the protest march, was later arrested and sentenced to 12 months in jail.

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## 40:55 Aung Myin Thar, Resettlement Village

The film cuts to alms for a Buddhist monk and the building of a “Kachin peace-making world pagoda,” being led by Buddhist abbot U Tay Seinna.

## 42:05 The Kachin Conflict

A narrator provides a brief history of contemporary Myanmar, with special emphasis on the ongoing war and strife in Kachin state, which has continued for much of the last century. This frames a series of comments about the Myitsone river and dam project by General Gun Maw, vice-chief of staff of the KIA, in Laiza, the KIO headquarters on the China-Myanmar border. A narrator, Dr. Farrelly, Dr. Tu Ja, and Hkapara Khun Awng further contextualize the matters at hand. The film brings together narration and interviews with scenes of fighting, when the Myanmar military attacks KIA positions. Also introduced here are internally displaced people in Kachin state; the *Dams, Drugs, and Democracy* team interviews an older woman, Lamai Gum Mai, at a Kachin IDP camp.

## 52:40 What Does the Future Hold?

Featured here are peace talks between the KIO and the Myanmar government in May 2013, then a note on the signing of a ceasefire in 2015. The film closes with final commentaries by people featured in the film: Li Guanghua, Maung Maung Aye, Seng Hkawng, Gum An Tu, and Share Gum Ja, followed by a song at Tang Hpre village.

## 60:00 Update Cards

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the documentary illustrate the relations between the Myitsone project, drugs, and democracy?
2. Why is the Myitsone Dam such a political and environmental flashpoint?
3. Does the current shift to a more democratic political system in Myanmar seem to be helping the people of Kachin state? Of Myanmar as a whole?
4. China needs to secure its energy supplies. Based on the documentary, explain China’s approach to its energy relations with Myanmar.
5. Compare and contrast the impact of the Myitsone Dam project on different people (see list above). How has each person been affected differently by the project?
6. How does the documentary help us think about rivers, nationalism, gender, and Chinese investment in Myanmar?
7. Discuss the significance of music and protest as seen in the documentary. What role does music play in the contestations seen?

8. The theme of being arrested appears several times during the documentary (e.g., the musicians, the gold miner, and Seng Hkwang). What do you think this means for understanding Myanmar?
9. What is the role, if any, of religion (Christianity, Buddhism) in shaping the debates about environmental justice in Kachin state and Myanmar more generally? How are religion and religious places used or adopted to frame the protests, the debates, and daily life?
10. What is the difference between the KIO and the KIA? How do the actors in each group view the Myitsone situation? Why?
11. How does *Dams, Drugs, and Democracy* compare and contrast with *Blood and Gold: Inside Burma's Hidden War*, which analyzes the war in Kachin state and also refers to the Myitsone Dam? *Blood and Gold* was directed by independent filmmaker Jason Motlagh for Al Jazeera's *People and Power* series, with support from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. In this news documentary, Motlagh "travels to Northern Myanmar, where the Kachin people are fighting a life-or-death struggle for autonomy."

### SHORT VERSION

View a 26-minute excerpt from *Dams, Drugs, and Democracy* from 16:07 to 42:04. The excerpt begins and ends with segments dealing with the Aung Myin Thar resettlement village.

### QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE SHORT VERSION

For a 50-minute class session: The 26-minute selection is rich and wide-ranging, offering multiple vantage points from which to engage fruitful discussion. I suggest printing out the study questions and distributing them to students prior to watching the selection. Give them a few minutes to read through the questions (4 minutes) and then show the selection (26 minutes). Suggest that they try to take notes that are relevant to the questions. After the students have watched the film, ask them to pair or triple up and try to address two or three of the questions (8 minutes). Finally, shift to collective class discussion, asking students to share their thoughts on any of the questions they want to address (8 minutes).

Compare and contrast the impact of the Myitsone Dam project on various people and their reactions to it. How has each person been differently affected by the project, and how have the people sought to address their individual situations?

What role, if any, does religion seem to play in shaping the debates about environmental justice in Kachin state and in Myanmar more generally? How are religion or religious places used or adopted to frame the protests, the debates, and daily life?

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1. If you were to write and perform a protest song or chant on an environmental topic related to the various themes in *Dams, Drugs, and Democracy*, what would it be? (For a subsequent class: Have the students polish and perform the song/chant).
2. The theme of being arrested appears several times during the documentary (e.g., in this selection, the march protest leader and the village woman). What do you think this means for understanding contemporary Myanmar?
3. Does the documentary help us think about rivers, nationalism, gender, and fear of China's foreign investment and its ownership of resources generally? If so, how? If not, why not?
4. How does the selection illustrate the relationship between the Myitsone project and the influx of drugs?
5. China needs to secure its energy supplies. Based on the film selection, explain China's approach to its energy relations with Myanmar.

## ACTIVITIES

1. If students attempted to write a protest song, have the students polish and perform the song/chant.
2. Have the students research and report on the history of the Shwedagon Pagoda as both a national shrine and religious epicenter of Myanmar.
3. Have the students try to find out what the symbolism is on the protest flags (red with a wheel-like symbol on it) in the short selection.
4. Have the students conduct research projects on the current situation in Kachin state and prepare presentations addressing key issues. What updates can they provide?
5. Have the students explore the nature of conflict in Myanmar's ethnic areas and borderlands. Have them analyze why there is so much strife in those areas and lands, and what they would do if they were leaders there.
6. Have students compare and contrast the Myitsone project with a development project in another area of the world. How are the geopolitical contexts different or similar? How do the impacts of the projects compare and contrast? What insight does comparative discussion about both help reveal about global environmental justice?
7. Have the students investigate and report on China's and Myanmar's energy security issues relative to the larger regional trends and dynamics, including India and Southeast Asia as a whole.





8. Have the students watch *Blood and Gold: Inside Burma's Hidden War*, which analyzes the war in Kachin state and also refers to the Myitsone Dam. In *Blood and Gold*, Al Jazeera's *People and Power* travels to Northern Myanmar, where the Kachin people are fighting a life-or-death struggle for autonomy. Have the students write a comparative paper on the two documentaries, highlighting key issues.
9. Have the students do some research on the history of Aung San Suu Kyi and her role in Myanmar's recent history, especially since 1988 and the onset of the Rohingya crisis, which has dominated recent Western media coverage of Myanmar.
10. The Rohingya and their persecution have dominated recent Western media coverage of Myanmar. Have the students compare the situation of the Kachin and the Kachin insurgency with the treatment of the Rohingya people and their plight. What seems similar? What seems different? How does religion relate to each?
11. If possible, take students to Myanmar on a short faculty-led course trip.

## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

*Dams, Drugs, and Democracy* website:

[www.damsdrugsanddemocracy.com/home.html](http://www.damsdrugsanddemocracy.com/home.html)

[www.damsdrugsanddemocracy.com/links.html](http://www.damsdrugsanddemocracy.com/links.html)

A collection that provides a wider framework for understanding water issues in Southeast Asia:

*Contested Waterscapes in the Mekong Region: Hydropower, Livelihoods and Governance* by Francois Molle, Tira Foran, and Mira Kakonen (eds.)

This essay provides an ethnopolitical analysis on the failure of the dam project:

Laur Kiik, "Nationalism and anti-ethno-politics: why 'Chinese development' failed at Myanmar's Myitsone Dam," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, (2016).

The following news articles help provide further background on the project and updates on what has happened since (and why):

[www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/world/asia/myanmar-china-myitsone-dam-project.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/world/asia/myanmar-china-myitsone-dam-project.html)

[theconversation.com/dams-on-myanmars-irrawaddy-river-could-fuel-more-conflicts-in-the-country-84386](http://theconversation.com/dams-on-myanmars-irrawaddy-river-could-fuel-more-conflicts-in-the-country-84386)

[www.mmtimes.com/national-news/24860-longer-wait-for-final-word-on-myitsone-dam-project.html](http://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/24860-longer-wait-for-final-word-on-myitsone-dam-project.html)

[www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/not-count-us-resisting-myitsone-dam-beyond-china-us-big-geopolitics.html](http://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/not-count-us-resisting-myitsone-dam-beyond-china-us-big-geopolitics.html)

Another documentary film, which is useful for comparative purposes and is also part of this collection, is *Blood and Gold: Inside Burma's Hidden War*. This film was supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

For additional resources and background on *Blood and Gold*:

[www.globalpolicy.org/the-dark-side-of-natural-resources-st/other-articlesanalysis-and-general-debate/51986-blood-and-gold-inside-burmas-hidden-war.html?itemid=id](http://www.globalpolicy.org/the-dark-side-of-natural-resources-st/other-articlesanalysis-and-general-debate/51986-blood-and-gold-inside-burmas-hidden-war.html?itemid=id)

[akrockefeller.com/news/blood-and-gold-inside-burmas-hidden-war/](http://akrockefeller.com/news/blood-and-gold-inside-burmas-hidden-war/)

[pulitzercenter.org/event/blood-and-gold-inside-burmas-hidden-war-jason-motlagh-film](http://pulitzercenter.org/event/blood-and-gold-inside-burmas-hidden-war-jason-motlagh-film)

Several dozen reports supported by the Pulitzer Center, examining the current crisis in Rakhine state and providing related stories:

[pulitzercenter.org/country/myanmar-burma](http://pulitzercenter.org/country/myanmar-burma)