

Dams, Drugs, Democracy

This program includes close captions and subtitles and has an interactive transcript.

[00:00:00.49] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:22.08] One country of particular shared concern is Burma. It's important for us and for others to try to understand better what is unfolding in Burma today.

[00:00:31.91] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:00:35.38] You live at the crossroads of east and south Asia. You border the most populated nations on the planet.

[00:00:44.69] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:00:51.83] We propose to resolve all these problems of violence between communities, between different ethnic groups. People who feel threatened are not going to sit down and sort out their problems. We've got to start with rule of law.

[00:01:07.00] Within these borders, we've seen some of the world's longest-running insurgencies which have cost countless lives. You now have a moment to transform ceasefires into lasting settlements, and to pursue peace where conflicts still linger, including Kachin State.

[00:01:43.41] In 2013, several journalists from Myanmar set out to film Kachin State in the far north of the country. They went to tell the story of the people who live there and the river that runs through their land. The team spent many months living in the local community.

[00:02:32.48] Myitson it's the birthplace of the Irawaddy River, where the N'Mai Hka and the Mali Hka rivers meet. A village called Tang Hpre stands at the confluence of the two rivers.

[00:02:51.87] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:04:41.54] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:05:01.82] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:05:37.38] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:06:09.18] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:08:41.92] [LAUGHTER]

[00:08:47.30] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:09:46.93] My name's doctor Nicholas Farrelly, and I'm a fellow here in the Australian National University's College of Asia and the Pacific. Much of my work focuses on politics and culture in northern Myanmar, where I have, for many years, dealt with challenging situations that have faced the Kachin people. The fact is northernmost Myanmar, the Kachin State in particular, it's a really rich place. There's jade, there's gold, there are water resources that you can tap for hydro, electricity. The sorts of profits that can be made in the Kachin State are simply astounding.

[00:10:30.37] Founded in December 29, 2002 with a registered capital of 12 billion Yuan, China Power Investment Corporation, or CPI, is one of the five Gencos in China, and a comprehensive energy group integrating power, coal, aluminum, railway, port, coal chemistry, environment protection, and other related industries. Possessing assets in hydropower, thermal power, nuclear power, and new energy, it is one of the three companies that can build and operate nuclear power in China. CPI is also actively launching projects overseas, including hydropower projects in Myanmar.

[00:11:05.20] China has very significant commercial interests in that part of Myanmar. One of their largest projects has been the effort to build a very large capacity hydroelectricity facility on the main stream of the Irrawaddy River, which, of course, is the river that runs straight down the middle of Myanmar, often described as the lifeline of the country.

[00:11:30.09] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:12:05.32] In 2006, China Power Investment Corporation came to an agreement with the Myanmar government to build the 15th largest dam in the world on the Irrawaddy river at Myitsone. The Myitsone Dam project is a joint venture between China Power Investment, or CPI, the Myanmar government, and the Asia World Company, Myanmar's largest conglomerate.

[00:12:31.95] CPI is the largest shareholder in the joint venture, owning 80%. We invited all the partners in the Myitsone Dam project to be interviewed for this film, but only CPI agreed.

[00:12:46.37] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:14:13.42] What is going to happen if the Myitsone dam is constructed? Let's start from the upstream. So first of all, we are going to have a new reservoir of man-made lake, not a natural one. There are some areas of historic heritage or cultural heritage. Some religious monuments or buildings, they are going to be flooded. There is a very significant correlation between mega-dam and the severe earthquake. Myitsone Dam site it's not far away from the great Sagaing fault, a very, very active fault.

[00:14:58.38] So there are a lot of examples all over the world. Once you construct or build a dam on the river, the problem is sediment. Sediments are trapped in the reservoir. Less sediment means less nutrients. You are going to have a depletion or degradation of fish species, shrimp species, and other aquatic lives. So you are going to have less fertile soils and less productivity. Crops yield, crop production, will become less and less year after year.

[00:15:37.44] The fluvial processes of our area will become weak. That means the intrusion of marine water or salt water into the delta area, and the [INAUDIBLE] will damage the [INAUDIBLE] fields of our area delta, very dangerous.

[00:15:57.26] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:16:44.19] [NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

[00:17:10.38] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:17:32.05] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:17:33.67]

[00:19:11.58] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:19:15.50] In 2011, in an unexpected development, the new president of Myanmar halted construction on the Myitsone Dam for the duration of his presidential term.

[00:19:26.51] The Myitsone Dam project was a project that was approved under Myanmar's former military dictatorship. That was a time when there was almost no transparency when it came to large scale investments by Chinese companies. The postponement of the construction was ordered by President Thein Sein, the president of Myanmar. He was getting advice that this is a dam that was causing a great deal of disquiet, not just in the Kachin State, but in other parts of the country. We understand that the Chinese government was taken aback by that turn of events and didn't have any forewarning, and that perhaps goes to show just how important the president and some of his advisors judged this issue was in terms of securing their own political legitimacy at a vulnerable moment in the country's recent evolution.

[00:20:33.68] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:20:34.99]

[00:21:33.25] [NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

[00:22:50.74] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:24:23.32] After the dam project was suspended in 2011, many of those who had been resettled started to drift back to the old village. It was illegal to return, but many felt that they had no choice, as they had to make a living for themselves and their families.

[00:24:54.40] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:25:18.28] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:26:33.28] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:26:34.65]

[00:27:29.46] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:28:18.96] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:29:14.99] Local villagers have also started to pan for gold more often to supplement their incomes and provide for their families.

[00:29:25.89] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:29:27.23]

[00:30:53.41] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:34:10.62] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:34:12.21]

[00:34:53.47] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:35:16.72] Myanmar ranks as the world's second-largest heroin producer behind Afghanistan.

[00:35:24.49] Kachin State in northernmost Myanmar is a spectacular place-- high mountains, deep valleys, big rivers. It's wedged right between China and India. They loom large over the Kachin State. The Chinese government has in mind that it needs to secure its energy supplies for what may prove to be a very turbulent 21st century. They have built pipelines across northern Myanmar to secure their oil and gas appetites. The reason is to ensure that they don't, in some future security contingency, find themselves starved of resources because the Strait of Malacca, which runs down here between Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, gets cut off. And so, Kachin state plays a particularly important role. It's the linchpin in a sense.

[00:36:13.53] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:36:15.36] CPI wants the Myitsone Dam project to be restarted following the next presidential election at the end of 2015. As that time approaches, CPI has been trying to emphasize the potential benefits of the dam.

[00:37:18.57] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:37:36.23] Despite CPI's public relations efforts, many people in Myanmar are still strongly opposed to the Myitsone Dam and are worried that work on the dam will start again soon. In March 2014, people from all over the country gathered in front of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar's holiest site.

[00:38:01.63] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:38:03.07]

[00:38:40.46] Over the following three months, they marched all the way from Yangon to the site of the Myitsone Dam, a distance of more than 1,200 kilometers.

[00:38:49.53] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:39:27.38] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:40:38.88] The leader of the protest march, [INAUDIBLE], was later arrested and charged with taking part in an illegal protest. He was sentenced to 12 months in jail.

[00:41:28.60] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:41:30.04]

[00:42:02.04] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:42:08.38] Kachin State has been at war for much of the last century. In the Second World War, the Kachin people fought with the British and Americans against the Japanese. After the war, and as Burma moved towards independence from Britain in 1948, the Kachin people expected that they would be free to run their own affairs in accordance with the Panglong agreement. But General Aung San, Myanmar's independence leader and architect of the Panglong Agreement, was assassinated in 1947, just before independence.

[00:42:48.60] For much of the 1950s, Myanmar was ravaged by insurgencies. The Kachin Independence Organization, the KIO, was founded in 1961. They wanted self-determination of Kachin State, and control over its rich resources. The following year, General Ne Win, the former head of the country's armed forces, seized power in Myanmar in a military coup. Then, for much of the next three decades, the Kachin Independence Army, the KIA, fought battle after battle against the military junta.

[00:43:37.27] Only in 1994 did the Myanmar government and the KIA sign a ceasefire, which led to 15 years of relative peace and prosperity in Kachin State. Kachin State is still divided between central government controlled areas and KIO territory. It requires special permission to travel between the government and the KIO areas. Laiza, located on the China-Myanmar border in Kachin State, is the headquarters of the KIO.

[00:44:22.16] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:44:23.59]

[00:44:58.98] The Myitsone Dam project contributed to a breakdown in trust between the KIO and the Myanmar government. In 2010, several bombs exploded near the dam site, reportedly killing four workers. The Myanmar government blamed the KIA, who denied responsibility. Myanmar began to open up, and held a general election in November 2010.

[00:45:26.28] After the elections that were held across Myanmar in November 2010, it became very clear that the Kachin ceasefire was in a fragile state. It was difficult for the Kachin leadership. There were those like Dr. Tu Ja who were trying to come up with a mechanism whereby Kachin independence interests could be represented in the new semi-democratic political system. But they didn't get a chance.

[00:45:54.50] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:45:55.81]

[00:46:37.78] In the early months of 2011, the ceasefire really did begin to unravel. By June of 2011, both sides were once again committed to war. On the 9th of June, 2011, a new war sparked up. It wasn't a surprise. It led to a new fight of torrid conflict between the Kachin and Myanmar central authorities. And it's now the aftershocks of that war that the Kachin people are having to get to grips with.

[00:47:07.76] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:47:59.03] In the past, they had often been fighting in the resource-rich areas of Kachin, such as the jade mines of Hpakant. However, the assaults by the Myanmar military in early 2013 drove deep into KIO territory.

[00:48:18.21] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:48:19.70]

[00:48:40.36] During the course of this long war, there have been widespread allegations of human rights abuses, and use of child soldiers on both sides.

[00:48:49.61] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:48:51.07]

[00:50:55.43] Part of the struggle that many people within the Kachin community are locked in is a struggle to work out precisely who it is who has the right to extract the wealth from this part of the country. And what we saw in late 2012 was the Myanmar army push right up to the gates of Laiza, and put themselves in some of the most tactically significant positions, looking over that headquarters for the Kachin Independence Organization. They did so to ensure that the Kachin were under no illusions about what would happen in a final phase of this confrontation. There was always going to be an element of restraint, even though for those in Laiza. In those tragic afternoons, it didn't feel like restraint at all. It felt like all-out war.

[00:51:51.05] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:52:33.70] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:52:38.56] After the tragic violence of early 2013, both sides began to explore the possibility of a ceasefire. A KIO delegation traveled to Myitkyina, capital of Kachin State, for talks with the Myanmar government in May 2013.

[00:52:59.41] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:53:07.35] [NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

[00:53:42.56] [CHEERING]

[00:53:56.45] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:55:05.08] When the Myanmar government is forced to account for all of its diverse peoples, it comes up with 135 different national race categories. Perhaps it's a paradise for anthropologists, but Myanmar, frankly, is a statesman's nightmare.

[00:55:21.68]

[00:55:33.82] It's pretty clear that any final settlement to this kind of conflict needs the local people to get a fair share of the resources that are in their own lands. And the Myanmar government will need to come up with a set of practices that will work for the Kachin, but for so many other groups all across the country.

[00:55:56.68] The Myanmar government signed a ceasefire accord with many ethnic armed groups in October of 2015, however, the KIO and several other armed groups did not sign. There are hopes that this ceasefire accord will lead to a more permanent peace settlement and bring an end to Myanmar's six decades of civil war.

[00:56:19.95] The status of the Myitsone Dam project, however, remains uncertain.

[00:56:25.54] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:56:26.82]

[00:56:44.65] A grand truth is we are going to lose so many things. OK, physical resources, natural resources, cultural resources, economic resources, every resource is going to be lost or damaged or degraded.

[00:57:05.04] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:57:08.02] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:57:09.46]

[00:58:51.04] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:58:55.54] [NON-ENGLISH SINGING]