

# Isaan villagers and students travel to mine-affected communities in Mexico

written by กองบรรณาธิการ | October 29, 2015

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This Friday, two representatives of a village affected by a gold mine in Loei Province and two members of Dao Din - a student activist group at Khon Kaen University - will travel to Oaxaca, Mexico, to meet with communities from across North America and Oaxaca state that are also protesting large-scale mining projects.

The Educational Network for Global and Grassroots Exchange (ENGAGE), a coalition of former study abroad students, raised the money to cover the Thai participants' travel costs through an online crowdfunding campaign and several fundraising events in Khon Kaen City. It also received a grant from the Global Greengrants Fund, a charity that supports environmental actions around the world.

The exchange was organized by ENGAGE and Servicios Universitarios Y Redes de Conocimientos en Oaxaca A.C. (SURCO), a Mexican community organizing network, after 300 masked men attacked Na Nong Bong, the gold mine-affected village in Loei, in [May of last year](#).

"After learning about this blatant disregard for human rights in Thailand, ENGAGE felt it necessary to take action and support the villagers who have been fighting the mine for years," says Rachel Karpelowitz, former ENGAGE Network Coordinator.



The exchange participants gathered in Na Nong Bong village in Loei Province last Sunday for a traditional baci ceremony. Over 50 villagers came to tie strings on the wrists of the four people traveling to Mexico in order to wish them good luck on their journey. The Lao ritual symbolizes the calling of the khwan, or soul, from wherever it might be roaming, back

to the body during a time of transition.

Na Nong Bong villagers have been fighting to close the gold mine located less than a kilometer from their homes for almost a decade. They say that the chemical waste produced by the mine has contaminated local streams and water sources used for farming and household purposes, leading to illness and reduced crop yields. In 2009, the [Ministry of Public Health](#) advised residents not to drink water from nearby sources or eat local vegetables.

Two students from the Dao Din human rights activist group will also join the exchange. Dao Din has been supporting the villagers in their efforts to close the gold mine for over seven years.

During the two-week exchange the Thai participants, joined by representatives of Canadian First Nations groups and an Appalachian community organizer, will travel to different indigenous communities in Oaxaca state in an effort to share strategies and experiences among mining resistance activists.

The participants argue that multinational mining companies threaten their local lands, communities, and cultures. Organizers hope the exchange will strengthen grassroots movements against the environmental contamination and violence brought about by extraction projects.

“It is critical that communities around the world, that people—who rarely are given choices about how the lands they live on are used—share experiences, explore strategies, and create coordinated action on a global level,” says Jonathan Treat, Director of Delegations for SURCO.

The two Na Nong Bong villagers traveling to Mexico - Phratrapron Kaenjumba, 35, and Surapan Rujichaiyavat, 44, were selected by fellow community members to represent the village in the delegation. Both were among those activist leaders hog-tied and beaten in the last year’s attack. Feeling unsafe ever since, the villagers are eager to learn new strategies to defend themselves against the mining company, Tungkum Ltd., and its allies.

“We need to learn how we can protect ourselves,” says Mr. Surapan, hopeful that he can learn from the experiences of Mexican anti-mining activists. “There might be times in the future when we will have to face similar situations [as the communities in Mexico].”

The Na Nong Bong villagers’ fear for safety resonates in San Jose del Progreso, a small town south of Oaxaca City. In March 2012, Bernardo Vazquez, a local activist, [was assassinated](#) after actively opposing a Canadian silver and gold mining project in his community.

The Dao Din students traveling to Mexico, Suttikiat Khotchaso, 27, and Jutamas Srihutthaphadungkit, 20, are hopeful that they will be able to share what they learned in Mexico by bringing back strategies for grassroots organizations in Northeastern Thailand.

“Sometimes old methods or strategies no longer apply,” Ms. Jutamas says. “We might not be using the best strategies because we don’t know how other people in other areas are doing things. It will be good to learn from other peoples’ experiences and then improve our own.”

Under the military government in Thailand, Na Nong Bong villagers and Dao Din activists have all faced threats. Villagers were ordered to stop organizing under martial law, and then under Article 44 of the Interim Constitution, which bans political activity in groups of five or more people. In June, seven Dao Din students were detained for 12 days after protesting the military regime.

Despite their continued struggle for human rights and against dictatorship, the delegates still fret

over the details of international travel. "I've never been on an airplane before," says Ms. Jutamas with a shrug, "what if I mess it up?"

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