

China's hunger for minerals stirs resistance in rural Thailand

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Chinese efforts to obtain a cheap source of a crop-boosting mineral are raising fears of an environmental crisis among farming communities in Thailand.

The future of a Thai-Chinese potash mine planned in northeastern Thailand is mired in uncertainty as villagers are putting up fierce opposition, fueled by concerns about livelihood security, health, and the environment.

After a protest group led by local women blocked access to drilling sites last year, the Chinese mining company filed a flurry of lawsuits against the villagers seeking 3.6 million baht (about 116,800 USD) in compensation.

Meanwhile, questions linger whether the outgoing military government tweaked legislation to the benefit of foreign mining companies while neglecting environmental protection and community rights.

Eying the treasure of the Northeast

China's global success in agricultural production is owed in part to a supply of cheap fertilizers. The country is the world's largest consumer of potash, a natural mineral that boost yields and enhances crops' water retention and disease resistance.

Chinese farmers depend on potash imports mainly from Canada, Russia and Belarus. But as prices of the mineral remain high with a surge of [almost 25 percent](#) in the past year, the country has pushed to develop new and cheaper sources.

It turned its eyes on the rich potash reserves in Thailand's Northeast.

The region, which has long mined salt, is sitting on two major potash

deposits discovered in the 1970s, known as the Khorat Basin and the Sakon Nakhon Basin. Yet in the following decades, the natural resource was left largely unexploited because of strong local opposition, environmental concerns, and legal restrictions.

After a military junta gained power in a coup in 2014, however, it announced plans to increase mineral resource extraction in the country to boost the economy.

“Thailand has huge deposits of potash ore, estimated at 400 billion tons, which have yet to be commercially exploited. This Government has already begun to support potash mining,” [Deputy Prime Minister Pridiyathorn Devakula](#) told a business conference in 2015.

In the same year, Chinese state-owned China Ming Ta Potash Corporation gained permission to explore 120,000 rai (about 47,500 acres) of land in the northeastern province of Sakon Nakhon.

“Potash deposits in the Northeast are like precious gold, and the government wants to exploit them for economic benefit,” mining industry expert Bamphen Chairak told *The Isaan Record*.

Besides the profits of the lucrative business with mining royalties, the Thai government hopes to reduce its own dependency on potash imports. The country currently imports about 700,000 tons of the mineral per year.

“China and Thailand are both looking for new potash supply sources to cut import and production costs,” said Apichat Sayasiyot, China Ming Ta’s manager. “Thailand has potash but needs the help of the Chinese to extract it. It’s a Thai-Chinese collaboration that will benefit both parties.”

Local fear and anger

In the rural district of Wanon Niwat in Sakon Nakhon province, people responded first with fear, and then with anger to the news of the planned potash mine. Local officials had failed to sufficiently inform the residents of 82 villages that their homes were now part of a mining area.

“The company had started exploring at two drilling sites but people in the community were left without any information about the project,” said Mali Saengbunsiri, a 50-year-old farmer and grandmother of four.

Only in July last year, three years after the project was approved, the local government officially informed residents in the district about the mining plans.

Farming communities in Wanon Niwat depend on the area's fertile soils, rivers, lakes, and wetlands that form a delicate ecosystem which provides them with food and other resources.

Many villagers in the district worry that the mining project will destroy farm lands, damage the environment, and poison water sources, as well as imperil people's health.

"Just imagine the impact of a huge industrial mining project here," said Mali, who is also a core leader of the local anti-mining group. "The scary thing about salt is that it is capable of damaging just about everything."

Poison from below

Potash mining produces large amounts of salt as a byproduct that can pose a threat to the area's soil, water, and animal life. In a region that already suffers from salt-affected soils, locals fear that the project will turn fields into barren land and kill off their crops.

If the rain washes the salt into rivers, lakes, and wetlands, few freshwater organisms can survive. It could end livelihoods based on fishing in the district's Huay Thong lake, a body of water that is also the main water source for thousands of people.

"We worry that all the fish will die and the soil will be so salty that we can't grow any crops on our land anymore," Mali said.

Thirty years ago, an rock salt operation in Borabue district in the northeastern province of Maha Sarakham caused an environmental disaster, poisoning land and water with salt and damaging people's livelihoods. The government eventually banned salt production in the area and ordered restoration efforts that today are still ongoing.

"We don't know how the company intends to protect us from the dust and salty water coming from the salt mountain in the mine," Mali said, referring to the proposed tailings pile. "How effective is it going to be?"

The risk of salt dust being blown by the wind from the mine into closeby communities is raising concerns about the potential impact on people's health.

Inhaling large amounts of salt dust can cause respiratory diseases, according to Sompon Phengkham from the Community-led Impact Assessment Institute, an independent center. The dust from the mine might also contain traces of heavy metals that could pose an additional health risk, she said.

Locals and experts are also concerned that large-scale potash mining will lead to the appearance of dangerous sinkholes. A rock salt operation in a nearby district caused one such hole that grew into a massive, 15-meter-deep pit the size of a football field.

China Ming Ta seeks to reassure local residents of its safety plans to alleviate these environmental and health risks. It pledges to implement measures to prevent the discharge of dust and salty water into the environment.

"We will take measures to return the salt piles into the mining tunnels in order to stabilize the soil and prevent the release of salt dust and salt water," company manager Apichat told *The Isaan Record* in an interview.

Farmers respond with anti-mining protests

But the mining company's assurances come too late to allay the fears of the people of Wanon Niwat. Fueled by the sense that fateful decisions had been made over their heads, villagers in the district organized an anti-mining group in 2016.

Led mainly by middle-aged and older women, the group has teamed up with activists, academics, and non-governmental organizations to oppose the potash mine. They put up protest banners, organized public forums, and submitted petitions to officials and the company to stop the project.

In February last year, the group escalated their protest and blocked the road to the site of the fourth borehole, effectively stopping the company from moving drilling equipment into the area.

The company plans to set up 60 drilling sites in order to evaluate the

quality of the potash before establishing the mine. Earlier, protesters also successfully blocked the site of the planned third borehole. This leaves the company with only two operational drilling sites.

Slapped with lawsuits

In response to the local activists' persistent opposition, the mining company took matters to court and filed a total of 20 lawsuits against nine members of the protest group.

"We are suing because [our operation] was illegally blocked causing financial damage to the company," said Apichat. "If we don't stay within the law, nobody can protect us, so it became necessary to file a legal complaint."

The company claimed that the blocking of the drilling sites cost it five million baht (about 157,500 USD) each time.

China Ming Ta accused the villagers of illegal obstruction of their mining site, defamation, and a violation of the Computer Crimes Act for demanding an official investigation into the mining project on social media. The company seeks compensation of 3.6 million baht (about 116,800 USD).

But Sakkaphon Chaisaengrat, the lawyer of the protesters, argues that the villagers acted well within the law and only exercised their rights.

"The law allows people to publicly exercise their community's rights to protect resources, culture and local ways of life," he said.

A military-drafted mining law

Activists and experts in the Northeast argued that local conflicts over natural resource management would likely grow more severe after the Thai government enacted new mining legislation in August 2017 in favour of industry and mining.

Drafted and approved by the military junta's appointed lawmakers, the new minerals act fast-tracks the approval process of mining concessions. The consideration period for permits was more than halved from previously 310 days to 100-150 days.

Lertsak Kumkongsak, a well-known environmental activist, said that the bill boosts the decision-making power of officials by setting up “mineral committees” that oversee mining operations in each province. The committees include mostly members from the Ministry of Industry and representatives of mining companies.

At the same time, the bill curbs people’s representation as well as the participation of communities in the management of natural resources, Lertsak argued.

Chainarong Setchua, an environmental expert at Maha Sarakham University, believes that the junta overhauled mining legislation with an eye on the mining industry of China and other foreign countries. It aimed to tear down regulatory barriers of environmental protection and public participation, he believes, to pave the way for commercial exploitation of Thailand’s mineral resources.

Underestimating local opposition

But the junta miscalculated the level of resistance the potash mining project would incite among people of Wanon Niwat and elsewhere.

“We don’t want industry here!” said Mali. “We won’t let this area, abundant in natural resources, be turned into an industrial zone.”

In fact, across the region, local groups have been organizing against mining projects, including in the provinces of [Nakhon Ratchasima](#), [Chaiyaphum](#), [Loei](#) and [Udon Thani](#).

Natural resource management experts argue that many of the mining projects in the region were ill-conceived from the start.

Santiparp Siri wattanaphaiboon, a lecturer at Udon Thani Rajabhat University, believes that setting up mines next to longstanding communities and nearby farms is a recipe for conflict.

“Mines in Canada are not set up in the vicinity of communities,” he said. “This is very different from Thailand, where mines are put into people’s backyards.”

CORRECTION: An earlier version stated the company is seeking 34 million baht

(about 1.07 million USD) in compensation. In fact, the amount is 3.6 million baht (about 116,800 USD).

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