In partnership with the Burmese military regime, three Western oil companies have built natural gas pipelines in southern Burma (Myanmar), leading to countless human rights abuses against the local population. Unocal (U.S.), Premier Oil (U.K.), and TotalFinaElf (France/Belgium) have used the brutal Burmese military as a security force for their pipeline projects, ignoring the evidence that the soldiers would commit severe abuses in the course of their security duties. Burmese soldiers have conscripted thousands of civilians to perform forced labor for the benefit of the pipelines, and have killed, raped, tortured, and forcibly relocated innocent villagers for the crime of living near the pipeline routes. Despite denials from the companies, soldiers guarding the pipeline continue to conscript slave laborers.

These pipeline projects provide the largest single source of income to the Burmese military, funding a corrupt and repressive regime that has massacred nonviolent protesters and allowed the drug trade to flourish. The pipeline routes also cut through one of the last intact rainforests in Southeast Asia, home to dozens of endangered species. The pipelines are among the most destructive investment projects in the world.

"I think that if there was not a pipeline, there would not be more soldiers, and so we would not need to work for the soldiers. Because of the pipeline, there were villagers who had to die and the villagers had to do the work for the soldiers and some had to flee away from the village."
— Refugee from Burma's pipeline region

UPDATE: SEPTEMBER 16, 2002

Premier Oil Announces Pullout from Operations in Burma
Ignoring Democracy, Funding Dictatorship

"[Premier Oil] should be ashamed of itself." — Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize winner and leader of Burma's democratic opposition

The Yadana and Yetagun pipelines are the largest foreign investment projects in Burma. Over the life of the projects, they are estimated to provide over three billion dollars in hard currency to the brutal Burma military regime. This is the military regime that since 1988 has massacred nonviolent protesters, ignored the results of democratic elections, and faces sanctions for its human rights abuses and for allowing the drug trade to flourish. Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace laureate who leads the pro-democracy opposition in Burma and who was the largest intact rainforest in Southeast Asia.

who

The Yadana consortium is operated by Total/Energies (France) and the Thai state oil company PTTBP. The Yetagun consortium is operated by Premier Oil (UK), along with Petronas (Malaysia), Nippon Oil (Japan), MOGE, and PTTBP. Several other multinational corporations have provided services to the projects, including the U.S. oil field service giant Halliburton, the Dutch company ING, Cabaret, and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries of Japan.

when

The corporations’ deals with the Burma military began in the late 1980s. Starting in 1990, the pipeline region was militarized to provide security for the pipeline projects. Construction on the Yadana project began in 2001, and it became operational in 2004; the Yetagun pipeline started construction in 2005 and became operational in 2008.

why

The pipeline supplies a gas power plant in Thailand currently using none of the gas goes to domestic Burma use. Although Thailand now has an energy surplus and cannot use all of the gas, under its contacts it must still pay for the gas at a price substantially above current market value.

Hiring the Army

"I stated forthrightly that the companies have hired the Burmese military to provide security for the project and pay for this through the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE)."
— U.S. Embassy Cable, relating statements by Unocal’s Joel Robinson

"All indirect aid to the army will have to go through MOGE." — Yadana project security assessment

"[An] immediate issue for the project is the fact that military security will ... have to be increased or relocated to enable the pipeline to be built." — Yetagun project impact assessment

From the beginning of the project, the oil companies knew that they would need major assistance from the Burma military. The military has provided three key services to the oil companies. First, the military secured the region before work on the pipelines began. As part of this effort, the military forcibly relocated several villages and committed countless human rights abuses. Second, as construction was commencing, the military directed the construction of service roads and help pads, as well as the construction of camps and barracks, through the use of forced labor. Finally, the military continues to provide ongoing security for the pipelines. Although the companies do not pay the military directly, they pay for its services through their partnership with MOGE.

The Companies’ Knowledge

"I know that in the early days of the execution of this project, military units in the area of the project were using forced labor.” — John Intris, former President of Unocal

"What I know is that in the very early stages of the project, in the very first months, we learnt about the use of forced labor by the army.” — Michel Viallard, head of Total Myanmar

"Military housing and local infrastructure is provided by underpaid or unpaid labour. The harsh conditions of those carrying out such labour — including young children — and the testimony of local people who will go to extremes to avoid it, belie the government claim that such work is voluntary.” — Yetagun project impact assessment

Although the companies are aware of human rights abuses associated with their pipelines, the oil companies have long been aware of the dangers of working with the Burma military. Unocal’s own consultants have told them that the military commits human rights abuses in the pipeline region. All the companies are aware that the army units providing security to the pipeline consist civil contractors for forced labor, to build infrastructure and supervise projects. A document from Total/Find Energy describes villagers “Hired by the Army” — a euphemism for conscription, regardless of whether the villagers were subsequently paid.

Environmental Devastation

In addition to rampant forced labor, soldiers providing security to the gas pipelines have committed some of the worst human rights abuses imaginable: rapes, torture, murder, and even using villagers as human minesweepers. The testimony of villagers who have encountered pipeline security forces speaks for itself: "When he came [home], he had lost his left eye, and his arms and legs were wounded and swollen. His back was bruised and swollen severely. I saw the scar from the rope on both of his arms and legs.”

"[E]ach way back from the video shop, four men, wearing uniforms... grabbed a woman... and took her to the side of the road. And these four men covered her face with clothes... and stripped her and rapidly raped her one by one.”

"Before our village was relocated, the soldiers killed many villagers in my village. Even though they were civilians, the soldiers did not trust them so they were killed.”

"One person from every house had to go to clear mines. The villagers had to go out over the place to find out whether the land mines were set up or not... We were very frightened of the land mines.”

"They killed my brother... He had seven children. He was 41 years old. He also owned land and was a farmer. He was not rich or poor, just average. . . . The military ordered him to come, but he did not know why. They told him he committed the village headman, and two others. At that time, my husband and | were on the farm. And we heard the sound of automatic gunfire... He was a normal villager, just working very hard for his family.”

the facts

the worst abuses

the people who get the profits from the gas pipeline are not the foreigners and the leaders in [the military].” — Burmese soldier who provided pipeline security

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EarthRights International (ERI) combines the power of law and the power of people to protect human rights and the environment.

U.S. Office
1612 K Street, N.W.
Suite 401
Washington, D.C. 20006
Tel: (202) 466-5188
Fax: (202) 466-5189
e-mail: infousa@earthrights.org

Southeast Asia Office
e-mail: infoasia@earthrights.org

www.earthrights.org

Join the Campaign Against Investment in Brutality!

Dozens of companies—including oil companies—have withdrawn from Burma due to pressure from consumers, shareholders, and human rights activists. Help put the pressure on Unocal and TotalFinaElf by:

• Boycotting Total, Fina, and Elf stations
• Urging your school, city, state or retirement fund to use shareholder pressure on these companies or to divest from them
visit www.earthrights.org or www.freedomcoaltion.org for more information
• Joining a campaign against oil companies in Burma
email zquante@igc.org to join the campaign against Unocal
email burmaoil-subscribe@onelist.com to join a mailing list on oil companies in Burma, which includes ways to take action
• Joining a campaign against all investment in Burma
visit www.freedomcoaltion.org or www.burmacampaign.org.uk for more information

For more information on the Yadana and Yetagun pipelines, including our full-length reports, Total Denial and Total Denial Continues, visit our website at www.earthrights.org.

Forced Labor Continues

“In 2003, I had to go porter about ten times. Most of the portering we did was for battalion 282 and battalion 273. They are patrolling for pipeline security, and we had to carry their food and supplies whenever they needed us.” — Recent refugee from the pipeline region

Although the pipelines are now completed, civilians continue to be conscripted for forced labor by pipeline security forces. Interviews conducted within the past year confirm that army battalions guarding the pipeline continue to force villagers to serve as porters, and that the villagers are sometimes beaten or left to die. But the companies continue to deny the abuses and refuse to accept responsibility.

Holding the Companies Accountable

None of the oil companies involved in human rights abuses in Burma has accepted responsibility for its actions, let alone tried to compensate the victims. Refugees from the pipeline region have, however, sought to use the legal system, suing Unocal in American courts with assistance from EarthRights International. In 2000 a U.S. federal judge found that there was evidence demonstrating that before joining the Project, Unocal knew that the military had a record of committing human rights abuses; that the Project hired and then military to provide security for the Project; that military forces in the area were committing numerous acts of violence; and that Unocal knew or should have known that the military did commit, was committing, and would continue to commit these abuses.

Despite this finding, the plaintiffs have not yet won a judgment against Unocal, but the legal case continues; for up-to-date information, visit our website (www.earthrights.org).

UPDATE:

Unocal scheduled to face trial in U.S. court in 2003