



**PRESS RELEASE -- for immediate release**

**Thursday, 26 May 2016**

**KAREN ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL ACTION RESEARCH (KESAN)**



### **Battlefields to refuge: the Salween Peace Park in Burma's Karen State**

MUTRAW DISTRICT, KAREN STATE, BURMA -- Can a battlefield be turned into an indigenous-run protected area for scores of endangered species like tigers, gibbons and wild cattle? Yes it can, according to almost 300 local leaders, ethnic soldiers and activists gathered May 23-26 for a consultation in this remote mountainous corner of Burma. They call it the Salween Peace Park, a first of its kind in the world.

"Foreign conservationists are amazed that more than 20 kinds of predators like tigers and clouded leopards survive here. They say, 'but it's not protected as a national park'. I tell them, it is the way of life of the Karen people that protects these species and their habitats. If you make it into a national park like in Thailand or Burma, the animals will all be gone," said Saw Blaw Htoo, leader of the biodiversity program of the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), the ethnic Karen organization helping to initiate the Salween Peace Park.

This initiative for a novel kind of protected area is supported by the Karen National Union (KNU) in Mutraw District of Karen State, an ethnic government that has fought for decades against the invasion and human rights depredations of Burma's notorious army. Mutraw, also known as Papun, is a heavily forested area along the border between Burma and Thailand. Through this land flows the Salween River, the longest undammed river in East Asia and the refuge of some of Asia's last indigenous peoples and endangered species. It is also the home to the longest running civil war on Earth, now in its fourth year of a fragile ceasefire.

The question almost 300 people representing 23 village tracts from 3 townships, meeting in this remote KNU stronghold, are asking is an ambitious one: Can peace be achieved and sustained? Can wildlife be protected? Can ethnic cultures be preserved? Can these things be done when the opposite is true for much of the world?

The answer from Lt. Gen. Baw Kyaw Heh, vice chief of staff of the Karen National Liberation Army, the armed wing of the KNU, was as direct as it was poignant:

"With the Salween Peace Park, we can survive as a nation."

Government officials in Burma's capital Naypyidaw and their consultants in the dam industry have a very different vision for the region, said Saw Paul Sein Twa, KESAN's director. They plan five massive dams for the wild and free Salween, which for its entire 2,800-km length from Tibet to the Indian Ocean is to date untamed by even a single dam. One of these dams, the 7,000-megawatt Mongton, would be the biggest

dam in Southeast Asia. Ninety percent of the power from these dams would be exported east to energy-hungry Thailand, with the ethnic people of eastern Burma bearing the ecological and human costs. Beyond dams, planners in the capital and investors abroad eye the Salween, hungry for minerals, timber and land for industrial agriculture. One consequence of these plans would be that hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced people, torn from their ancestral homes during decades of fighting, would be unable to return home.

The concept of a peace park is not new to the world, with more than 180 established globally. The idea combines universal aspirations: to end and avoid violent conflict; to protect the environment; to ensure the preservation of ethnic cultural resources; and to help post-conflict communities recover and rebuild. But according to research of peace parks commissioned by KESAN, the Salween Peace Park would be the only one of its kind. Most peace parks include one or two of the four objectives. What makes the Salween Peace Park unique is that it would be the only peace park in the world to include all four aims.

Much work and many challenges remain before the Salween Peace Park becomes a reality, but the foundation has been laid. KESAN's founders and staff have been cooperating for nearly two decades with the KNU's forest department and local communities in Karen State. For example, forest officers and villagers have demarcated 73,416 acres of community forest based on traditional Karen land-use practices. Rangers with the Wildlife Protection Units patrol against poachers of wildlife and precious wood in KNU-established wildlife sanctuaries. Researchers have captured images of dozens of endangered species with camera traps. Villagers draw maps and thrash out comprehensive land management systems and regulations. Women groups collect and categorize lists of rare orchids and medicinal plants found in their mountain homes. Eco-agriculture teams research and promote traditional organic farming. An innovative traditional school encourages villagers to respect the value of their indigenous knowledge about living in harmony with nature.

"If our way of life and environmental knowledge is recognized and supported, we can continue to protect biodiversity here. We're very organized" said Saw Blaw Htoo, proudly showing photos of endangered wild cattle and leopards taken by his camera traps. "In Thailand, if a local wants to stop poachers, who will help them? Here, when our patrols are outnumbered by armed poachers, we can have two dozen Karen soldiers there in time to help. Our Karen soldiers believe that wildlife protection is part of their job."

This historic consultation for the Salween Peace Park resulted in the creation of a council of elders, a secretariat and a steering committee, which will together draft a charter for the Peace Park and continue consultations with communities throughout 2016. The next consultation will be held in December.

To learn more about the Salween Peace Park, please contact ...

Saw Paul Sein Twa, KESAN director: +66 (0) 817247093 (Karen, Burmese and English)

Saw Klo Htoo, Head of Forest Department, Mutraw District: +66 24026142 (Karen and Burmese)