

Thilawa Social Development Group
Mekong Watch

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Displaced Villagers File Complaint Regarding Japan's Investment in Myanmar's Thilawa Special Economic Zone

Tokyo, Japan – Three residents from the Thilawa Special Economic Zone (SEZ) area near Yangon, Myanmar, delivered an Objection to the Examiner for the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) today in Tokyo. It is the first known formal complaint filed under JICA's Objection Procedures since the restructuring of JICA in 2008. One of the examiners, Dr. Sachihiko Harashina met the villagers in person to receive the complaint.

The Objection outlined damages that the villagers from the 400 ha area of Phase I of the project have incurred in their relocation from their homes and land, and those damages likely to be incurred by the residents on 2,000 ha that will be used in subsequent phases of the project. These damages include the loss of farmland and access to farmland, loss of livelihood opportunities, impoverishment, loss of educational opportunities for the villagers' children, substandard housing and basic infrastructure in the Myaing Tha Yar resettlement site and loss of access to clean water.

"The houses they built in Myaing Tha Yar were so small and poor quality, so I decided to take compensation instead so I could build a better house for my family. Now I am in debt. And because it took so long to build my house, I lost my contract with the factory where I worked. This new life is very difficult for me," said Khine Win, one of the Requesters of the Objection.

"The government and authorities are not listening to us villagers. We have tried to tell JICA how things really are in Thilawa by repeatedly submitting letters to JICA requesting appropriate resettlement and compensation measures, as required by their Guidelines and international standards. JICA has not listened to our voices. That's why we submitted the Objection today. We hope that the examiner will investigate the real situation in Thilawa and the project's compliance of JICA Guidelines," said Mya Hlaing, another Requester and the leader of the Thilawa Social Development Group.

The Objection to JICA also detailed the agency's non-compliance with its own Guidelines for Environmental and Social Considerations, including failing to assume responsibility for accountability for the project's implementation. In the resettlement process, JICA failed to provide compensation to resettled persons at replacement cost in a timely manner and did not provide any compensation for confiscated land, accepting the Myanmar Government's claims of legally acquiring the land rather than conducting its own investigation. Additionally, JICA has not upheld its responsibility to improve or at least restore displaced persons' standard of living, income opportunities and production levels. It also has not ensured that displaced persons were able to meaningfully and appropriately participate in the development, implementation, and monitoring of resettlement plans.

"JICA has not sincerely responded to the local villagers, who have pointed out the deterioration of their living conditions for the last 7 months. This is clearly JICA's failure to

appropriately implement its own Guidelines. It is because JICA has neglected to address the villagers' concerns that they are now proceeding with this formal objection. Even while the examiners carry out their investigation, the Japanese government and JICA must take steps to ensure that there is no further deterioration in the standard of living of the affected people, and urgent measures are needed to understand and address the villagers' living conditions and concerns. How JICA handles this case will be a litmus test for other projects in Myanmar," said Minari Tsuchikawa from Mekong Watch, a Japanese NGO that monitors Japan-related projects in Mekong Region to prevent the impoverishment of people by development projects.

JICA has invested around 500 million yen (5 billion kyat), a 10% stake, in the Thilawa SEZ Development Project. Three Japanese companies, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo and Marubeni, hold an additional 39% stake. The Myanmar Government and a joint venture of 9 Myanmar companies have invested the remaining 10% and 41% respectively.

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