Since 2009, the Burmese military regime (the State Peace and Development Council – SPDC), has been constructing a new 361-km long railway between Mong Nai in southern Shan State and Kengtung in eastern Shan State. The regime is claiming that the railway will promote the development of Shan State, facilitate passenger travel and ‘contribute to swift flow of commodities.” However, the speed and ruthlessness with which the railway is being carved through this isolated border area reveal a much more sinister agenda.

Scores of bulldozers and trucks are at work at each end of the railway, where thousands of acres of farmlands have already been confiscated. Attempts by farmers to complain have been met with threats of prison.

Preparing for war
The real purpose of the railway is strategic. It cuts between the northern and southern territories of the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest ceasefire group, which has refused to come under the regime’s control as a Border Guard Force. In the event of an offensive against the UWSA, or the resistance forces of the Shan State Army-South, the railway will enable rapid deployment of heavy weapons and other military supplies to this remote mountainous area.

Apart from munitions, the main commodities that the railway will carry are natural resources plundered without consent from local communities. The railway runs directly through Mong Kok, where the regime and Thai investors are planning to excavate millions of tons of lignite for export to Thailand.

STOP the army in its tracks!
We denounce this railway as a further expansion of the regime’s war apparatus in Shan State, and demand an immediate halt to construction. The railway should only be built when it will serve the interests of local communities.
When farmers went to complain to the local authorities, they were told that the railway was an “army project” and anyone resisting would end up in prison.

Railway slices agricultural heart of Mong Nai

In February 2010, Mong Nai township authorities announced that the new railway would be built directly through the fertile farmlands to the east of the town. The new railway could easily have taken a much shorter route to the west of the town, where there is no farmland, but the eastern route evidently served the authorities’ security purposes.

Mong Nai was formerly one of southern Shan State’s most fertile agricultural areas, but mass forced relocation in 1996-1998, land confiscation by the Burma Army, and damaging agricultural policies have caused the production of rice and other crops to plummet. The decision to build the new railway directly through the township’s few remaining rice-fields has therefore incensed local farmers.

The military authorities first told local farmers and headmen that they would simply confiscate, without compensation, a thin sliver of land to build the tracks. They assured villagers that the rest of their lands would not be affected, as earth would be brought in from elsewhere to build up the railway embankments.

However, at the end of February the authorities ordered that none of the fields adjoining the route could be irrigated. Anyone caught watering their fields would be imprisoned. Then about 150 workers were sent in with bulldozers and ten-wheeler trucks to begin digging up the fields and building the railway embankments.

The cutting of the water supply meant that far greater areas of land were affected than just the confiscated areas. Farmers had also not yet harvested their dry season crops of soy bean, tomatoes, water melons and cucumber, so this was all lost. Furthermore, bulldozers have been digging soil from adjoining fields to build up the embankments, leaving gaping trenches.

The total amount of land lost to the railway is over a thousand acres, approximately 13% of the lowland fields cultivated around Mong Nai. The total value of the dry season soy bean crop alone that farmers lost this year is estimated at about 25 million kyat (about US$25,000).
Poor Track Record

Until the early 1990s, there was no railway system in southeast Shan State. Trains from central Burma ended at Shwenyaung, near Taunggyi. But between 1992-1996, the regime ordered the building of new rail links down to Loikaw in Karenni State, up to Lawksawk, and southeast from Shwenyaung. Over one million local villagers were forced to construct these railways without pay, and many died during the construction.

At the same time, a short 44-km stretch of rail was constructed between Mong Nai and Namzarng, which was supposed to link across to the railway in the west. However, until today, the link is not completed. Due to poor construction and maintenance, the railways remain in constant disrepair, with embankments frequently collapsing, and trains derailing. Safety concerns and the painfully slow speed of the trains mean that few passengers travel by rail.

Toxic transport

The new railway will facilitate transport of coal from Mong Kok, where the regime and Thai investors are planning to excavate millions of tons of lignite and build a coal-fired power plant for export of both coal and electricity to Thailand. Thousands of local villagers are being forcibly relocated to make way for the mining project, which will have severe toxic impacts on the local environment and the Kok River, which flows through northern Thailand.

Farmlands confiscated in Kengtung

Since early 2009, about 2,000 acres of land have been confiscated from villagers living in the western outskirts of Kengtung. Land excavation in these areas has been ongoing since mid-2009.

Damage to property

To bring construction materials from south of Mong Nai, ten-wheel trucks have been constantly driving through the centre of the town to the new railway site in the east. The vibrations from the trucks have caused damage to houses all along the route.
“We are really angry that they took our land and we want it back. We have been using this land for generations.”

“We don’t want anything from the government. Whatever they do is useless for us. Nobody even uses the old railway (from Mong Nai to Namzarng) any more.”

The strategic nature of the new railway provides further evidence that Burma’s generals are planning to secure and maintain control over the people and resources of Shan State for the long term. Whatever civilian front they bring in after their 2010 elections, the infrastructure of military oppression will remain and our people will continue to suffer.

Our demands:
• The Burmese military authorities must immediately stop the construction of the Kengtung-Mong Nai railway.
• New railways should only be built when they serve the interests of the local communities along the route.