

JICA said funding Myanmar evictions

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Villagers in Myanmar forced from their homes by an industrial development project funded by the Japanese and Myanmar governments submitted a formal complaint to the Japan International Cooperation Agency in Tokyo on Monday, demanding a probe.

JICA was the Japanese partner on the project.

Three residents, representing more than 1,000 families who either moved or are expected to be forced out in Thilawa, a suburb of Yangon, say they ended up in an area with lousy water and other facilities and few prospects for fair employment.

“There are no trees and there’s no grass in the area we were forced to resettle in. . . . Farmers can no longer farm,” said Khine Win, 28, told a press conference in Tokyo.

They accuse JICA of funding the project without sufficiently assessing the environmental and sociological impact as its Guidelines for Environmental and Social Consideration stipulate.

The guidelines set out the responsibilities of JICA and its stakeholders to guard against causing environmental and social damage, by respecting the rights of all people involved and by paying special attention to vulnerable social groups.

In Tokyo, the residents urged the agency to look into the case and to examine their claims that the government of Myanmar forced them to vacate before the project got underway in November last year.

Trading companies Mitsubishi Corp., Marubeni Corp. and Sumitomo Corp., hold a 49 percent stake in the project, which is aimed at developing a 400-hectare site inside the 2,400-hectare Thilawa Special Economic Zone. The rest is held by Myanmar and local companies. On April 23, JICA announced it would fund the consortium. While the agency refuses to disclose the extent of its financial involvement, one Japanese media report said the agency would extend about ¥500 million in the form of official development assistance.

Mekong Watch, a Tokyo-based non-governmental organization that supports the residents, said 68 families were evicted and given space on a tiny plot of land with poor water supply outside the development zone in November last year. It said they received insufficient compensation and support, leaving farmers without land and workers and children with lengthy commutes to factories and schools.

Of the 68 families, at least 20 households have already abandoned their new homes, the group said. Some residents say Myanmar authorities threatened them with jail if they failed to leave. They said JICA should fully investigate their living conditions and the process by which they were forced out, and urge the government of Myanmar to provide the support they are owed.

Resettled resident Win, a mechanic, said he was one of those coerced into signing a relocation deal.

“I didn’t want to sign the paper. But government officials came to my house many times, and in the end, I had no choice but to sign the agreement,” he said.

JICA said it made proper checks before deciding to fund the project.

“We believe we have taken appropriate measures in accordance with the guidelines,” a spokesperson said, adding

that the agency would study the complaint and act appropriately.

“We have urged the Myanmar government to deal with the issue. . . . From the ownership point of view, it’s important for the government to deal with it first,” the spokesperson said.

JICA is preparing to arrange a meeting with the residents and the government, the official said.

Photos

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