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Southeast Asia

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Vietnam farmers fall to bauxite bulldozers

By Tran Dinh Thanh Lam

HO CHI MINH CITY - A plan to mine bauxite deposits in Vietnam's Central Highlands, and whose opponents include famed general Vo Nguyen Giap, has provoked dissent even in the companies involved while already tearing up the livelihoods of tea and coffee farmers in nearby towns.

"Hills that used to be plantations of tea have already been bulldozed into a 50-hectare site to locate the bauxite project," the state-controlled Tuoi Tre newspaper has reported from Lam Dong province, the location of one of the planned mines.

"The same thing has happened to the coffee hills in Dak Nong province, but on a larger scale - the construction site may stretch



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to 200 hectares," Tuoi Tre said of the second proposed mine site.

The government's plan to mine bauxite for the production of aluminum has resulted in an outpouring of concern on the part of Vietnamese environmentalists and scientists.

Last month, amid the rising concerns, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung called for a thorough review of bauxite mining projects and a look at ways to better monitor its impact, and ensure that environmental standards are followed.

A seminar on the issue was held in the Vietnamese capital Hanoi, co-sponsored by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MCI) and the Vietnam's Union of Science and Technology Associations.

"In past years, the Central Highlands has focused on agricultural plantations, but its economic results have been limited and the life of local inhabitants remains difficult with poor infrastructure and low cultural standards," Nguyen Manh Quan, director of MCI's heavy industries department, told the 50 scientists gathered at the seminar.

"Bauxite has been defined as an important force for socio-economic development of the region," he said.

The comments were the latest in a string of public statements by senior Communist Party officials since the prime minister approved a directive to allow the mining and processing of bauxite ore in late 2007. Vietnam is believed to have the world's third largest reserves of bauxite, at 5.5 billion tonnes.

The directive allowed the state-run Vietnam Coal and Mineral Industries Group (Vinacomin) to go into a joint venture with a Chinese company to build an aluminum factory and prepare for major mining operations in the two provinces of the fertile central part of the country.

"Each project will produce 600,000 tonnes of aluminum,



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creating some 2,000 jobs and earning US\$150 million to \$200 million per year," Vinacomin's president Doan Van Kien said.

Many scientists, environmentalists and cultural experts disagree and have voiced strong concern about the negative impacts of the mining. They also argue that the government is overstating the economic benefits.

"Both projects risk facing huge economic losses," Nguyen Van Ban, a former director of Vinachim, said. "A small rise in cost or decrease in world price will easily make the project unprofitable."

"I don't know what the rationale is for exploiting bauxite now and not in the 1980s," Nguyen Xuan, a student majoring in environment at the University of Ho Chi Minh City said in an interview. "The government has given two economic reasons: the increasing domestic need for aluminum and its increasing price on the world market."

"Vietnam imports just 100,000 tonnes of aluminum a year - the metal is always available, and its price, therefore, could not increase significantly," he said.

The best-known critic of the plans has been Vo Nguyen Giap, the well-known Vietnamese general and one of the founders of the Vietnamese Communist Party.

In an open letter to the seminar, he asked the government to cancel the bauxite project. "In terms of national interests and sustainable and long-term development, bauxite exploitation will generate critical environmental, social and security effects," his letter said.

In a letter to Prime Minister Dung earlier this year, Giap said he had overseen a study into bauxite mining in the region together with Soviet experts in the early 1980s. At that time, the experts advised against the project because of the "risk of serious ecological damage," it said.

Others have argued the mining would destroy vast forests and crop areas and create mountains of toxic sludge.

Tea growers in Lam Dong province have already witnessed negative impacts as a result of the proposed mining projects.

"I don't know what kind of benefit I will get from the project, but it's so miserable to look at these hills denuded of tea plantations," Vu Van Bay, a local farmer whose land has been taken for the mine, told reporters. He said he had tried to find a suitable alternative area of land to cultivate, but "it's not easy to find a cultivable land since water is so scarce here."

The area has a large lake from which farmers pump water to irrigate their tea and coffee plantations. The bauxite company plans to use this to store "red mud", the name given to the toxic waste generated by bauxite mining.

"There will be no more lake," Le Viet Quang, director of Lam Dong Bauxite, a subsidiary of Vinacomin, which is undertaking the mining, told reporters recently. "Our Chinese partners will dredge the lake and turn it into a reservoir for red mud."

Nguyen Thanh Son, expert in mining and director of Red River Energy, another Vinacomin subsidiary, is one of the fiercest opponents of his group's bauxite plan.

"Why are we converting an economically productive area into an open pit mine?" Son said, adding that for the same level of investment the rate of return from bauxite mining is far less than coffee growing. "After the bauxite ores are mined, the soil is no longer suitable for growing crops without extensive remediation."

Vinachim officials have claimed these negative impacts will be minimized by the modern Chinese technology that will be used in the mining process, despite the fact similar schemes utilizing the same equipment have in the past been shut down by the Chinese government.

Son said bauxite mining and aluminum production would require extensive water, and thus use up and contaminate the water resources of the region that already lacks water for its industrial crops.

Experts believe that underground sources of water in the Highlands are limited and have already fallen significantly over the last decade due to intense irrigation.

"The 'red mud' is very dangerous to the environment because 70% of it is sodium hydroxide," said Son. "The only

solution is to bury it or contain it permanently and safely." The hilly terrain in the Central Highlands adds to the difficulty of safely storing it.

The large quantity of red sludge could break down any reservoir and become an environment disaster. "With such unsafe storage, red mud could overflow reservoirs or infiltrate the soil and be washed by rainwater into waterways throughout the Central Highlands and down to the southern region of Vietnam," Son said.

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