

# ETHICS, SCIENCE AND CONFLICT IN THE AMBER MINES

The location of valuable material in a conflict zone such as amber in Northern Myanmar raises ethical questions with scientists.

Media reports have underlined a link between the perpetuation of an ongoing armed conflict in Myanmar northern Kachin State and the exploitation of regional natural resources, mainly jade, amber and gold, by local and foreign operators. “These commodities are fueling the conflict,” said Paul Donowitz, the Washington, D.C.–based campaign leader for Myanmar at Global Witness, a nongovernmental organization (“Troubled treasure”, in Science, 24 May 2019)\*.

While acknowledging this sad reality, the GRS Gem Research Swiss Laboratory (GRS) and the Peretti Museum foundation (in incorporation) wishes to distance itself from this way of acquisition of material.

Since its foundation in 1996, GRS has always insisted upon adhering to ethical guidelines in its research and commercial activities. In parallel with these activities all over the world, GRS has put up and financed substantial socio-economic and humanitarian projects for the benefit of local destitute populations (see #GRS Helps Youtube).

These last years, pieces of amber containing fossils of dinosaurs and other organic material dating back to 99 million years have been discovered in Kachin State’s Hukawng Valley (Tiger Valley). These discoveries have drawn the attention of the global paleontological

community as well as collectors, in particular Chinese citizens who are offering staggering amounts of money to acquire these pieces. It is a fact that Hukawng Valley’s amber mines are located in a zone where a conflict has been going on since 2011 between the Myanmar army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), a regional insurgency group fighting for autonomy. This conflict has already resulted in the death of many people and the displacement of 130,000 civilians. It is also well documented that a significant portion of the Hukawng Valley’s amber production is transported through identified eastern routes to the lucrative market of China, in particular through Tengchong, a prominent market in Yunnan province across the Myanmar border. Large amounts of cash from this trade can potentially be funnelled through intermediaries and agents to the warring factions, both the Myanmar Army and the KIA (see BOX), with questionable concern for the benefit of local populations.

It’s much less known though that another part of Hukawng Valley’s amber production is transported by miners and agents to Yangon, the country’s economic capital, where it is auctioned in emporiums run by the Myanmar government. Although it is not said that there are no ethical concerns in this route, it is the official way of exporting the goods including taxes for the state.

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\* 9th July 2017 the military drops leaflets to the mining area to warn the people to leave the mining area, 30. January 2018 the Burmese military bombs the Amber mines, since March 2019 a ceasefire is in place that ended the conflict. Since approximately March 2019 the Tanai area is not an active conflict zone anymore, since a peace agreement between the KIA and Burmese government is in place.



TOP A Kachin leader distributes food to a refugee during a GRS humanitarian campaign. 2018, GRS.

BOTTOM Civilians from Tanai township amber mines area flee a conflict between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army. 2018, GRS.



GRS (and the Peretti museum foundation) wishes to point out first that it has always acquired pieces of Hukawng Valley amber for scientific research purposes through this official process only. GRS can provide all documents certifying the legality of this process.

In 2017, like any other economic actor in the region GRS was confronted to an escalation of the conflict in this amber mining area. In mid-2017, the Myanmar Army dropped leaflets over Tanai township, an area including amber mines under the control of the KIA, ordering local residents to evacuate. Anybody, including miners, who would remain in the area would be considered as an enemy combatant. In January 2018, the Myanmar military started to carry out airstrikes and heavy shelling in areas near amber mines.

Amongst other locations, Awng Lawt, a 400-houses village close to the KIA's Brigade 2 headquarters inhabited mostly by farmers and miners, was targeted. Fighting between Myanmar Army and KIA intensified in the whole area. Some people managed to reach safety in Myitkyina (Kachin State's capital) but thousands were trapped in the conflict zone and forced to hide wherever they could.

GRS took two decisions: first to completely stop the purchase of amber from that area (the mining production actually also stopped and there was no supply), and second to assist as much as it could Internally Displaced People (IDPs) trapped in the jungle and in the surroundings of an old Christian Baptist church and whose fate has become extremely precarious.



Civilians from Tanai township amber mines area flee a conflict between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army and hide in the jungle. 2018, GRS.



Such a humanitarian operation had to be organized in total confidentiality and initially international humanitarian organisations were not allowed to step in this area. It took some time for representatives of a few Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) and United Nations agencies to access these IDPs camps.

From late April 2018 onwards GRS (and the Peretti museum foundation) through the discrete and efficient mediation of local citizens managed to funnel funds to the conflict area that were used to provide for relief personnel and equipment (medicines, tents, bamboo, food, clothes, blankets, plastic sheets, cooking material, water pipes, etc). With that aid, Kachin community and religious leaders developed four projects scattered over the region and aimed at sheltering and providing basic needs to approx thousand IDPs (example see list below).

Trinity Hpyen Yen Babang IDPs Camp (august 2018), Hkalup Hpung Nawku Hting Nu Baptist Church, Charity of provision of Aid to the People at temporary in Tanai township (June 2018).

While this crisis was developing in Tanai township, the GRS acquired amber material from another mining area, outside the conflict zone, in Hkamti township, more than 30km outside of that conflict zone.

With its direct involvement in humanitarian and social projects benefiting local impoverished populations, GRS (and the Peretti museum fondation) wishes also to bring its modest proposals to the establishment of a code of ethical guidelines in the sourcing of material that would be accepted and recognized by the international scientific community.



Civilians from Tanai township amber mines take shelter in a improvised refugee camp after fleeing a conflict between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army. 2018, GRS.





A Christian church in a Kachin village is used as a shelter by civilians from Tanai township amber mines who have fled a conflict between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army. 2018, GRS.





TOP Civilians from Tanai township amber mines have set up a communal kitchen in a improvised refugee camp after fleeing a conflict between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army. 2018, GRS.  
BOTTOM The conflict between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army that has resumed in 2011 has displaced 130,000 people. 2011, Thierry Falise.





Civilians from Tanai township amber mines who have fled a conflict between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army take shelter in a Christian church in a Kachin village. 2018, GRS.



Civilians from Tanai township amber mines who have fled a conflict between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army sign a board requesting assistance to the displaced people. 2018, GRS.





Civilians from Tanai township amber mines who have fled a conflict between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army queue to get food in a improvised refugee camp. 2018, GRS.



A bamboo shelter built for civilians from Tanai township amber mines who have fled a conflict between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army. 2018, GRS.



# AN INCURSION INTO AMBER MINES

A GRS delegate visited Tanai amber mines a few days before they were bombed

In February 2018, a representative from GRS managed to have access to the amber mine area in Tanai township. After landing in Myitkyina (Kachin State's capital in northern Myanmar), the delegate made a six hours road trip (approximately 100 miles) to Tanai city. It took another five hours (including a three hours boat ride on the Nam Kwan Chaung river) to reach Zee Phyu Gone in a mining area controlled by the KIA. Zee Phyu Gone is a typical mining camp with markets, food and equipment stores. The supply of these items is auctioned to the highest bidder by the KIA who also attributes mining licences and work permits (to general supply workers, miners and mine owners). The GRS delegate has learnt that licences on the best productive locations were granted to Chinese citizens who have crossed the border under the KIA's supervision. Kachin, Burmese and other locals were granted lesser quality spots.

Due to the intensification of the conflict between the Myanmar Army and the KIA, the population in Zee Phyu Gone has dropped from 100,000 to 20,000 people in less than five years.

The actual mining sites made of hundreds of digging spots are located another two hours walk from the main camp. Miners and visitors had to stop at several check points manned by the KIA where weapons, cameras and mobile phones are confiscated and work permits checked. Amber traders are requested to stay at the camp.

On the way out, amber production has to be displayed at the check-points before reaching Zee Phyu Gone camp where auctions are organized in the presence of the mine owner, buyers and a KIA representative who secured the collection of a tax. To prevent amber to be smuggled out of the official road, the whole area is protected by landmines set up by the KIA.



## AN INCURSION INTO AMBER MINES



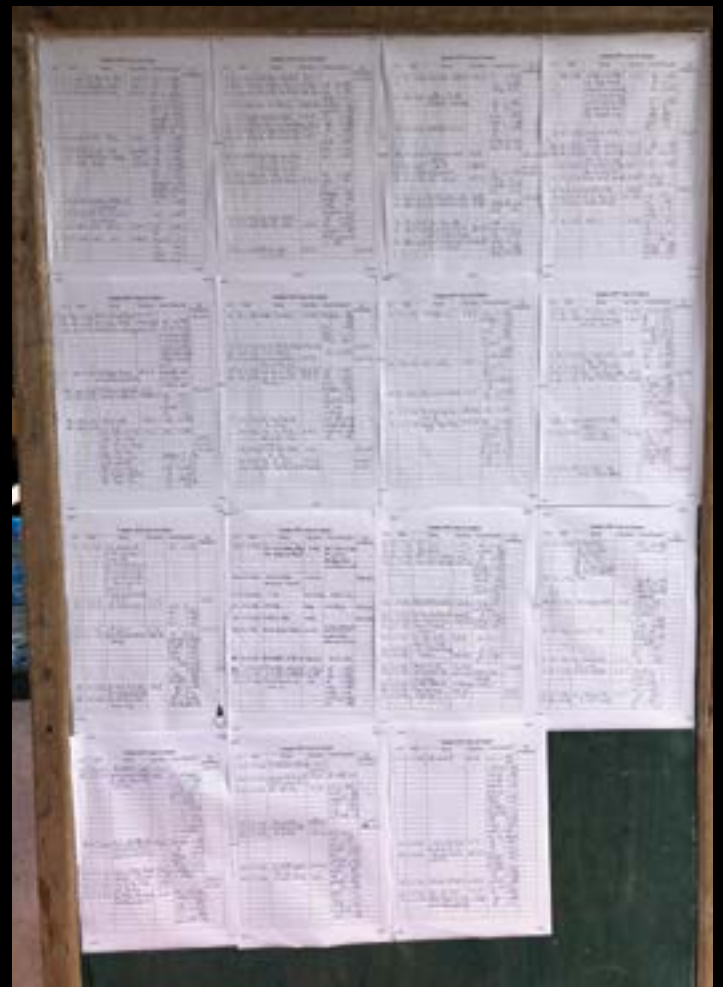
TOP LEFT A pier along Nam Kwang Chaun river that goes to the amber mines area.  
TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM Miners' shelters and diggings sites at a amber mining area in Tanai township. 2018, GRS.





# PHOTO ALBUM OF CHARITY IN THE AMBER MINE

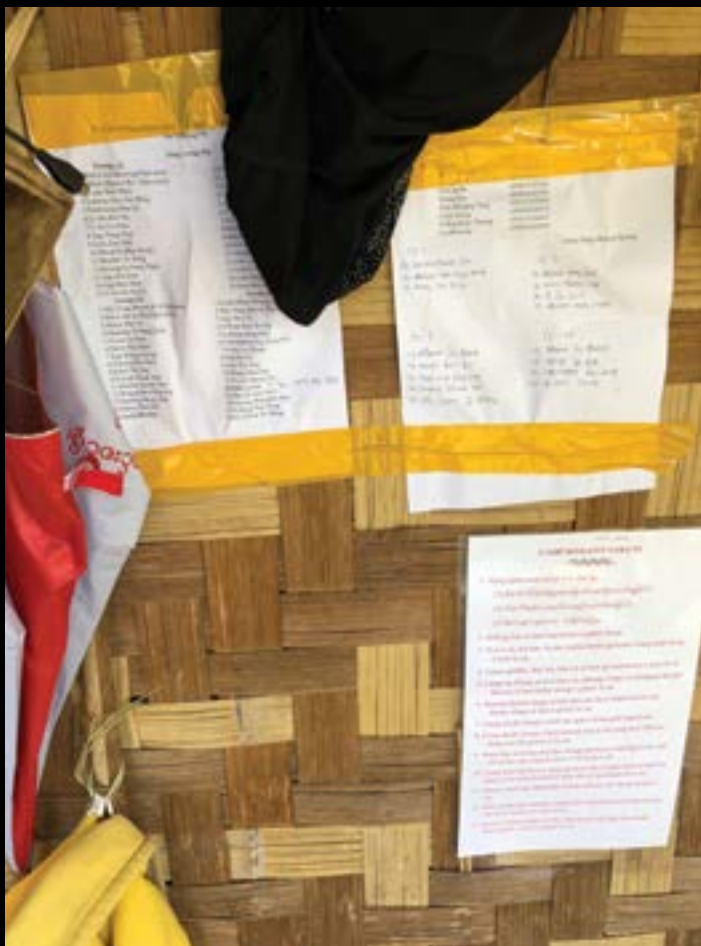
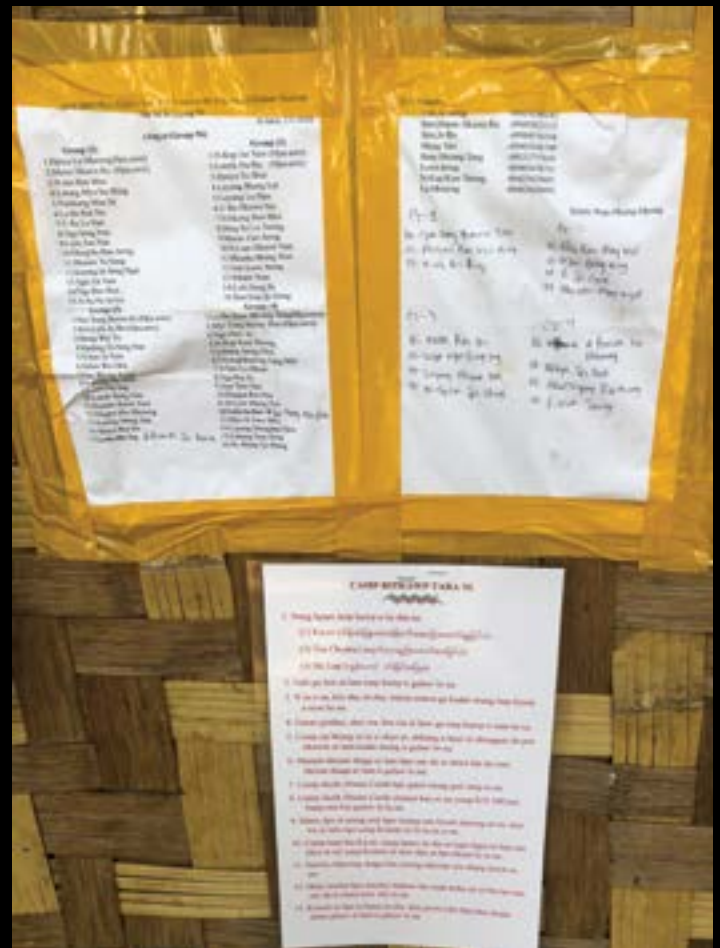
No	H.Hs	Village name	Male	Female	Total	Remarks
1	10	Sani Tu Yang	19	14	33	
2	23	Bum Nen Yang	64	53	117	
3	8	Gwi Htau	15	16	31	
4	3	Bung Ze Zup	11	12	23	
5	3	Hkum Tsai Taw Yang	5	10	15	
6	2	Gum San Yang	1	2	3	
7	7	Buip Zup	14	18	32	
8	26	H-ging Kawng	48	73	121	
9	12	Sun Ngai Yang	24	35	59	
10	22	Tang Bau Yang	38	54	92	
11	49	Pung Sui Yang	99	125	224	
12	42	Zup Mai Yang	102	147	249	
13	1	Ja Htu Yang	-	2	2	
14	6	Maw la	18	19	37	
15	6	Lavet Mai Yang/Nawt sang	11	16	27	
<b>Total</b>	<b>220</b>		<b>489</b>	<b>596</b>	<b>1085</b>	



People replaced by conflict and supported by Dr.Adolf Peretti.



# PHOTO ALBUM OF CHARITY IN THE AMBER MINE









## APPENDIX





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