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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Rochun, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 January 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Recent Infrastructure Projects in Northeast India

Mizoram battled war to secure independence decades ago, after the British left India. Mizoram was absorbed as a state into India and then like many other states in the northeast, relatively ignored, receiving no support for its post-conflict/ post Indian independence economic revival.

India's post-independence neglect of Northeast India can be attributed to several factors.

1. The north eastern states of India have historically faced challenges related to connectivity, infrastructure and cultural diversity which have contributed to a sense of being marginalized.
2. Geographical isolation, ethnic diversity, and historical factors have also played a role in the region's perceived neglect.
3. In the past, when central government invested funds for infrastructure projects, 90% of the money would be stolen by corrupt ministers of the state. Quite rightly Central government has been leery of any further investment.

Since 2011 however, India's growing trade interests with Myanmar and the rest of east Asia have accelerated investment into the region. Modern infrastructure is being constructed to improve connectivity between the North-Eastern states and the rest of India, North-East India has the potential to lead the nation's development. The nations of Northeast India have historically served as a point of contact for the nation's long-standing cultural ties to East Asia, crucial in advancing trade, travel, and tourism there in the future.

China is very interested in the Jewel of Myanmar, located right next to the Northeast of India.

Some of the future upcoming North East India Mega Projects 2024 are:

1. Arunachal Frontier Highway
2. Kamkhya Temple Corridor
3. Sela Tunnel
4. Guwahati Metro
5. Noney Bridge
6. Brahmaputra Expressway
7. Palasbary-Sualkuchi Bridge
8. Sivok Rangpo Rail Link
9. Integrated Hospitality and Convention Centre
10. Tata Semiconductor Plant
11. Guwahati Airport New Terminal
12. Amrit GIG City
13. Kaladan Multimodal Transit Project
14. North East Capital Rail Connect

On this paper, we want to highlight two of these projects as most of these mega projects for the Northeast are going to be built on indigenous people lands or connecting to it. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (hereinafter referred to as "Kaladan Project") is a route that runs by ship from Kolkata to Myanmar and then from Myanmar to Mizoram via road. Traveling from Kolkata Port to Sittwe Port in Myanmar; it then continues via the Kaladan River and the road that links Mizoram with Myanmar.

When this project was approved in 2008, the estimated cost was Rs 535.91 Crore (USD 500m). In 2015, the price went up to Rs 2904 Crore (USD 2.9 billion). India is covering all of the costs seeking to ease India's access to Southeast Asia. It is hoped that this will provide an alternate route between the landlocked northeast, and the rest of India. The project was scheduled to be completed by 2014, but the project has been delayed and is expected to be fully operational only by 2025. Once completed, the infrastructure will belong to the Myanmar government, but designed to achieve India's economic and geostrategic interests.

The Kaladan Project is developed on indigenous people's land both in Arakan and Chin states – Myanmar's least-developed and most poverty-prone states – as well as in Mizoram, India where improved infrastructure is badly needed. The Kaladan Project has the potential to provide a number of benefits for local indigenous people from improved transportation infrastructure, increasing trade opportunities for local farmers and producers with lower food prices, employment opportunities and economic development. It remains an open question whether the Kaladan Project was implemented in a way that ensures that the people living along the project route are the main beneficiaries of this large-scale infrastructure development.

Rochun started researching this project since 2012 and to date, some major concern have been experienced by people living along the Kaladan Project route:

1. Lack of consultation, information, and transparency
2. Some campaigners claim environmental damage in the form of road construction and spoil banks, they claim leads to climate change
3. Labour discrimination
4. Land confiscation and unfair compensations
5. Threats to local cultural heritage
6. Ecological destruction.
7. Multiple armed groups in-fighting along the Indo-Myanmar border which has turned the whole area into a no-go zone.

Human rights violations have been perpetrated during the implementation of the Project, especially in Myanmar site. The implementation of the Kaladan Project was promised to be fully transparent and should have ensured full local public consultation and participation; with the benefits of the project going to the least advantaged communities; and accountability for all the stakeholders involved in the project. This has led to runaway cost overruns, with still no further progress to completion.

To ensure respect for the rights of indigenous people in business and development contexts, a recommendation for both governments of India and Myanmar were given by various indigenous organization and local NGOs to include participatory consultations with local people:

1. Prevent human rights abuse especially with Myanmar still under a coup.
2. Conduct health, Environmental and Social Impact Assessments and make the results public.
3. Identify and develop a mitigation plan for potential negative health, environmental, social and economic impacts.
4. Prioritizing economic development for the indigenous community through employment.

North East Capital Rail Connect is one of the most exciting mega projects, because railroads haven't reached the outskirts of the state let alone their capital or business hubs. The Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) will invest more than Rs 95,261 crore (USD 9.50 billion) in order to complete 21 projects. Among these projects is the construction of a bridge that will connect the capitals of Nagaland by 2026 and Manipur, Mizoram, and Meghalaya by 2024.

The northeast cities of Assam, Guwahati (near the capital Dispur), Agartala (near the capital Tripura), and Naharlagun (near the capital Itanagar) are already connected by rail. Rs 51,787 crore (USD 51billion) has already been set aside with the intention of connecting the remaining state capitals and expanding the region's line capacity. It is the hope of Rochun and NE people alike that Mega projects in the Northeast of India will show significant improvements in the socio-economic environment of the region. Tourism is hoped to boom, right now tourism is almost non-existent in the Northeast.

These ambitious projects have the potential to increase economic growth, enhance inclusive growth and fulfil infrastructure gaps. With boosting connectivity, the untapped potential of the region will be explored. This will open new opportunities for skills development, employment generation and general prosperity, not only for the region but for all of India.

It is crucial that impact measurements and assessments from either governments or third parties such as local or international organizations are involved in the implementation of these agenda items. Promotion and protection of all human rights including rights to development where there is informed prior consent to the indigenous people living in this area. Therefore, Rochun asks for UN support as peace keepers to help making sure the ports are build and that roads are open.

The future looks bright for Mizoram for infrastructure as the newly elected ZPM state govt has promised to be corruption free and money spent should be allocated honestly and effectively (at least for the next 5 years!)

Rochun fully support Central Govt initiatives into these projects and hope these development projects will result in the indigenous Chin, Mizo and Kuki people of India, Chittagong Hill Tracks and Myanmar a true milestone of connecting with their lands, resources, and livelihoods. The international trade and business conducted in these areas should bring the upliftment of culture and languages, disintegration of their social bonds and protection of their overall identity in the foreseeable future. Finally, the change to transit from a third world country into the Singapore of India.

Note: Rochun work with communities and advocates for Lai and Zo indigenous tribes in Mizoram, India; Chin state in Myanmar and Chittagong Hill tracks in Bangladesh where the indigenous Zo, Lai and Chin live. This area was once one large tribe homeland with their own chiefs. The kingdoms were split into three countries by the so-called "divide and rule" policy of British colonialism 200 years ago. There is very limited representation of these tribes in their respective countries as they represent a tiny number of population often hindered by their landlocked territories and stringent boundaries set by the governing central body of their respective countries.