

PRESS RELEASE

Lahpai Seng Raw, 2013 Roman Magsaysay Awardee

First of all I wish to offer my heartfelt thanks to the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation and the Board of Trustees for acknowledging my work and including me in this year's illustrious list of awardees.

I am deeply honored by this award, but also humbled in the knowledge that I owe it all to the host of wonderful friends, colleagues and partners at home and abroad, who have sustained me in my work with their wise counsel, help and encouragement. So I accept this award not as a personal honour, but as a celebration of our collective achievement.

I first embarked on the 'development' journey, quite inadvertently in 1987, when the late Maran Brang Seng, Chairman of the Kachin Independent Organization (KIO), persuaded me to become involved in work to improve the situation of destitute Kachin communities along the borderlands of northern Myanmar. Today, I thank him and the KIO leadership for directing me on this path. I would also like to offer my sincere thanks to the government of Myanmar for opening the door for me to initiate openly and freely, programmes that would assist conflict-affected communities after the 1994 ceasefire agreements.

Sadly, as many of us know, that ceasefire in Kachin was not sustained. After 17 years fighting resumed in June 2011 on such a scale that to this day some 70,000 peoples are displaced. Without lasting peace there can be no real development. But the recent May 28-30 Myitkyina dialogue between the government and the KIO has given me new hope and I will continue to coordinate efforts, wherever possible, to resolve the underlying political grievances of the ethnic minority peoples of Myanmar and ensure that voices of the common people are heard in the ongoing peaceful transformation process.

In keeping with my commitment to work for sustainable peace and a development process that will evenly spread across the country, I pledge to use the prize money towards projects that will protect and preserve the Myitsone area in northern Myanmar, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for its communities. Myitsone refers to the confluence area where 2 rivers converge to form the Irrawaddy River, the lifeblood of the nation.

Today the area is under threat from a dam project which poses grave dangers to its delicate eco-system, its cultural and religious heritage sites, and its communities, displaced and deprived of land and livelihood.

Losing Myitsone, for the Kachin, is like losing his or her heart and soul. It would be a loss of unbearable proportions, not just for the Kachin at the source of the Irrawaddy, but for the rest of the country also, for whom the river is like “ a mother who feeds Myanmar’s citizens”.

The dam project was suspended under Presidential Orders in 2011, but there are strong indications of an imminent resumption of construction. I am therefore, most grateful to the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation for providing me with the opportunity not only to use my prize money to protect and preserve Myitsone, but also a powerful forum to publicize the need to stop the dam construction once and for all. My fervent hope is that the Irrawaddy will continue to flow for all time, and that efforts to make this a reality will be a factor that unites all citizens of Myanmar.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lahpai Seng Raw'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'L' and 'S'.

Lahpai Seng Raw
Yangon, 25 July 2013

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