

## Hill Tribe People Blamed for Deforestation\*

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A government working group in charge of formulating measures to stop hill tribe people from destroying forests in northern Thailand believes the problem has reached a crisis and the policy toward the hill tribes must now emphasize suppressing illegal activities, especially forest poaching, rather than accommodating them.

Suthee Argaslerksh, permanent secretary for the PM's Office, who heads the working group told **The Nation** recently that a large number of hill tribe people destroy forests for profits, and not just to make ends meet as most outsiders believe.

Many hill tribe people are in the business of cutting trees in national forests and selling the wood. They clear the forests to grow maize on a well-organized large-scale basis. "These are not innocent hilltribesmen who do the traditional slash-and-burn cultivation. They are more sophisticated, and I would say more dangerous, than you would think" Suthee said.

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They grow maize to sell the crops in town. Some of them even have pick-up trucks to transport the crop into town and to take supplies back to their communities. In one community on Doi Inthanon, Chiang Mai, some hill people have bought 10 wheeled trucks, Suthee reported.

He said government attempts to stop forest destruction by the hill tribe people have failed because there are too many hill tribe people scattered over 22 northern provinces; the government does not know how many are there, the estimate is between 700,000 and one million.

While many of them have settled down, others still roam the northern region and they resist government attempts to confine them to any settlement areas, Suthee added.

Another senior official who is familiar with this problem told **The Nation** forest destruction in the northern region could chiefly be blamed on the hill tribe people. Moreover, they are also responsible for polluting water sources with residue from insecticides and other chemicals used in their farming.

The official who asked not to be named said soil erosion caused by the denudation of trees in the water source forests has muddied the water in Mae Ping, Mae Kok, and Nan rivers. This, coupled with the chemical residue, has made the water in these rivers unsafe for human consumption downstream.

He concurred with Suthee that a large number of hill tribe people clear forests to plant maize for commercial purposes. He cited as example Lao San who is headman of Ban Khek Noi in Lom Sak District of Phetchabun. He said Lao San is a well off and experienced farmer/merchant. Lao San grows opium poppy to make money, rice for consumption in his household, maize, coffee and lichee for sale. Lao San even employs Thai villagers on his farm.

The official said sophisticated tribesmen like Lao San do not have to depend on merchants in town. They can transport their crops and sell them in town. The merchants in town actually depend on these people to supply them with crops.

This official strongly disagrees with the Public Welfare Department in trying to accommodate the hill tribe people regardless of whether they are engaging in any illegal activities or not. "Instead of stopping the hill tribe people from encroaching on national forests, officials of the Public Welfare Department usually go in to help them settle in national forests," he said.

Highlanders are often recruited to serve as security guards for road construction crews in areas infested by communist insurgents. These hilltribesmen would see the richness of the virgin forests and return later to cut the trees. This was the case in Khlong Lan in Kamphaeng Phet, he added.

The Public Welfare Department is supervising about 350,000 hill tribe people. But the authorities believe that the actual hill tribe population is much larger. In Tak, for example, the population was initially registered at about 60,000. Several years later, another official survey found 500-600 new villages, and the tribal population in this northern province has doubled.

In Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, and Phayao, over 1,000 new villages have been set up in recent years. They have been populated by tribal migrants from Burma and Laos.

These people have strong family ties. When one family manages to establish in one area, family members usually send word to invite their relatives to move across the border to join them in starting a new village. Thus, hill tribe people

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continue to trickle across the border from Burma and Laos into northern Thailand.

The growing population puts a lot of pressure on the national forests as well as on settlement areas prepared by the authorities. The policy of accommodation has caused resentment among Thai villagers in the lowlands who often clash with hill tribe people in competing for lands.

Many hill tribe people are dissatisfied when they are given only 15 rai of land for farming in settlement areas because each family usually clears over 100 rai of forest and claim it as their land.

Suthee said it is time for the authorities to change their view of the hill tribe people. "We used to think that they are helpless pitiful people. But now, we have found that they are also extremely destructive to our forests and we must stop them" Suthee said.

One top priority in this problem is controlling and confining people in settlement areas, and not allowing them to roam from one forest to another. Those who resist government control and those who destroy forests will be severely dealt with, Suthee said.

Those who have just migrated from Burma and Laos will be pushed back as soon as possible. But some of them may be allowed to settle in a hill tribe centre in Chiang Rai. Border security will also be improved to prevent new migrants from entering Thailand.

The hill tribe people will all be evacuated from water source areas. Those who live in national forests which have

not yet been completely destroyed will be moved as soon as suitable resettlement locations have been found. Those living in forests which have already been denuded of trees will be contained in their present locations until they too can be moved into resettlement centres.