

Break in Toxic Tailings Pond Fuels Villagers' Fight Against Gold Mine

LOEI – In the past month, the walls of a gold mine's tailings pond in Na Nong Bong, Loei have collapsed not once but three times. The tailings pond, which holds the waste water used to dissolve the gold from the ore, contains extremely high levels of cyanide and other chemicals used in the extraction process. As such, the community members from the neighboring village, located just one kilometer from the Tungkom Limited mine, are channeling their fear of the effects into their ongoing fight to close the mine.

People Who Love Their Hometown (PWLTH), a community organization comprised of concerned villagers, has been fighting to close the mine since 2006 in attempts to mitigate the contamination of their food and water. Since the gold mine began its operations, the villagers have experienced lower crop yields, skin rashes, and high levels of cyanide and arsenic in their blood which they attribute to contamination from mining operations. As such, the leak from the tailings pond, which contains cyanide and other dangerous chemicals, has given them greater cause for concern.

“On the 28th of October, the day the wall collapsed for the second time,” explained one of the leaders of PWLTH, “We found that that the water leaked out into some of the farms that were growing yard long beans. The farmers couldn't harvest because there was water in their fields. We didn't know whether or not the water was dangerous or not.”

The villagers were the first to report the leak to the government offices after a member of PWLTH found unexpected water in his field. The villagers sent a report to the

Provincial Industry Office (PIO) as well as the Department of Primary Industry and Mining (DPIM) and then contacted the Tambon Administration Organization (TAO) to survey the area.

On October 30th, the TAO sent a committee to investigate the broken wall as well as the quality of the water that leaked from the pond. The TAO reported, "TKL has admitted the wall did collapse and that they have been continuously repairing the damage to the wall of the tailings pond."

The community, however, is still not fully convinced that there will be no lasting effects from the leak.

"It is necessary for the company to warn the people," said one of the leaders from PWLTH. "We don't know whether or not this water is dangerous, because no tests have been done on the water. But we are scared of what the effects might be."

In response to the villagers' report, the DPIM issued an order to the company to shut down operations until the situation was resolved. The company appealed to the PIO, however, claiming that they were working in accordance with Article 58 of the Mineral Act and, furthermore, that they needed to continue mining in order to acquire specific rocks needed to repair the break that can only come through the crushing process. At present, the mining company, which has assured the government they are working to fortify the tailings pond wall, is still operating.

The leak comes at a particularly pivotal moment for PWLTH, as Tungkom Limited will be holding a public scoping forum on the 22nd of this month. The forum, which has been postponed four times already due to protests staged by the community organization, is one step in the process of obtaining concessions for opening a new mining site near the existing one. The members of PWLTH, however, hope that the news of the tailings pond leak will strengthen their case for the decommissioning of the current mine as well as halting

concessions for the newly proposed mine.

Tungkum Limited, which has been in hot water with its shareholders and the Stock Exchange of Thailand over the past year for [alleged financial mismanagement](#), now has more to worry about.
