

Headlines

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Myanmar Human Rights Abuse Case Against US Oil Giant to Go Ahead

A lawsuit claiming US energy giant UNOCAL was complicit in human rights abuses committed by Myanmar's military regime will go ahead in California in September, lawyers said.

A Los Angeles judge made the ruling on the six-year-old case Monday, according to attorneys for villagers who lived near a disputed pipeline built with "slave labor" to carry natural gas from Myanmar to neighboring Thailand.

"This is a huge victory for us and means that the heart of our long-running case against UNOCAL will go to a jury and be heard in open court for the first time," said civil rights lawyer Paul Hoffman, an attorney for the villagers.

"We hope that this will serve as a message to UNOCAL and other firms that deal with regimes engaged in human rights violations that if you do business with the devil you can be held responsible for the devil's work," he said.

The suit, originally filed in 1996, claims UNOCAL was partly responsible for human rights violations committed by Myanmar's military junta during the construction of the Yadana pipeline commissioned by UNOCAL and its joint venture partner, the Myanmar government.

They have long alleged that UNOCAL -- and its partners including France's Total oil and Britain's Premier oil -- were aware forced labor was used in Myanmar before they agreed to build the pipeline, but went ahead with the project anyway.

The airing of the case of John Doe et al v. UNOCAL Corp. in the California Superior Court will mark the first time such claims against a US corporation's overseas conduct would be heard in a US court, Hoffman said.

"We presented the court with evidence that the Burmese (Myanmar) military forced villagers to perform hard labor against their will and committed widespread human rights violations for the benefit of Unocal's project," said another lawyer, Dan Stormer.

"UNOCAL was dealing with the devil. Now they have to answer to a jury," he added following Judge Victoria Chaney's rejection on Monday of California-based UNOCAL's bid to have the case dismissed.

UNOCAL spokesman Barry Lane strongly denied the company was in any way responsible for the rights abuses he conceded were committed by the military of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma.

"We were not party in any way to any rights abuses. We are not partners with the military, did not request anything from the military and did not receive services from the military," he said.

"There has not been any decision so far in this case yet and the judge has indicated that there are a number of areas of the case that she is not going to proceed with."

Lane also said while the case would go ahead in September following the judge's rejection of UNOCAL's bid for dismissal and the plaintiffs' request for a summary judgment, it remained unclear which arguments would be heard.

A similar lawsuit brought in a US federal court by the villagers, backed by the organization [EarthRights International](#), was rejected in September 2000, forcing them to refile the suit in a California state court.

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