SRI LANKAN RICE FARMERS VOW TO FIGHT CHINESE INVESTORS

BERAGAMA: These days, Vimalabudhi Thero, head monk at the Beragama village Buddhist temple, is consumed more by worldly concerns than matters of the soul. With news that Chinese investors are eyeing the fertile plains he calls home, villagers worry this could end generations of family farming in their verdant corner of southern Sri Lanka.

“My biggest fear is that I will be left with a temple and a bunch of Chinese donating alms to me,” the monk said from the veranda of his living quarters, surveying the vast paddy fields stretching before him. His whitewashed temple is now a protest veranda of sorts, with a bunch of Chinese donating alms to me,” the monk said from the veranda of his living quarters, surveying the vast paddy fields stretching before him. His whitewashed temple is now a protest center for his Buddhist community.

Beragama - which lies about 250 km from the capital Colombo - was itself born out of another government development plan, one launched nearly 80 years ago, when people were moved in to settle an area that was little more than jungle.

At the tail end of British rule, the then-government began shifting people into fertile areas to establish agriculture. The settlemetns attracted even more people after Sri Lanka’s declaration of independence in 1948, village elders said. Since then, families have lived off the land in relative poverty, growing rice mostly in vast paddies. “These are our ancestral lands, they are fertile. In the dry zone, this land with water supply is vital, that is why these lands have been eyed,” said Dushan Pathirana, a third generation resident. “We don’t want go and live 70 km from here. Our lives are here, we can not be uprooted like that.”

Disquiet at the top

There is also opposition to the project from the country’s own politicians, even those who back foreign investment. The former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who lost power to incumbent President Maithripala Sirisena in January 2015, promised that any villager who lost land would be properly compensated. According to government officials, new investment is urgently needed to ease the nation’s debt repayments. Sri Lanka’s foreign debt is estimated by its Central Bank to be around $64 billion, with around $8 billion owed to China.

Minister chides industry

There were 73 deaths in South African mines last year, down slightly from 77 in 2015. “Courts should not be used as a tool to stifle debate and threaten government into taking positions,” Zwane told journalists at the conference. “We’ll take positions. We are here to govern. And we’ll do exactly that.” Speaking to AFP on the sidelines of the conference, his deputy was more diplomatic.

“When you end up closing an entire mine when you’ve got a localized problem, the economic damage of that is significant,” said Chamber of Mines CEO Roger Baxter. But Zwane has insisted he will not compromise on safety standards and slammed mining companies for “threatening” his department with court action.

SOUTH AFRICA GOVT., MINING INDUSTRY TENSIONS TENSION ‘INDABA’

CAPE TOWN: South Africa has advertised it is “open for business” at the world’s largest annual mining conference, but industry players worry regulatory confusion could prevent the country from cashing in on the bull years that may lie ahead.

After mineral resources minister Mosebenzi Zwane told the Mining Indaba in Cape Town that rising commodity prices marked the start of “a new spring”, Neal Froneman, chief executive of the Sibanye mining company, said that the “investment appetite is very negative.” Analysts and miners have decimated a regulatory environment that they say has hit investment and forced industry and government to shut it out in court.

Sibanye is taking the government to court for about 26 million rand after one of its platinum mines was completely shut down following a fatal accident in September. Last year a court also said safety officers acted disproportionately when operations at an AngloGold Ashanti gold mine were suspended over violations in a single section of the mine.

“Tension between the government and the mining industry - a key jobs provider - was palpable at the Indaba. The Chamber of Mines is not the only stakeholder in South Africa that is affected by the mining charter,” Zwane said. “The majority of the 60 stakeholders that we have consulted with are very happy.”

Meanwhile, amendments to key mining legislation have been stuck in parliament for four years. “This industry absolutely requires regulatory certainty,” said Baxter. “Four years down the road is just too long. The industry cannot wait this long for these bits of legislation.” The minister announced the latest version of charter will be published next month, while the long-awaited legislation should be passed come June.

Until it is, analysts say the uncertain regulatory situation could mean South Africa fails to benefit as markets pick up. “It’s all stick and no carrot,” said mining analyst Peter Leon. He said the government needed to start incentivizing the industry if it wanted to attract investors. “We need to move away from this obsession around regulation to one which is more enabling environment.” Mining contributes about eight percent to South Africa’s GDP and accounts for some 490,000 direct jobs. The country has an unemployment rate of about 27 percent, a 13-year high.

AFP