

## Historical Significance of the Ledo Road

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### Abstract

Ledo Road was one of the most significant factors to decide the victory between the contending powers of Allies and Axis in the Asia front during World War II. It was also the vital factor for the survival of the Chinese Chang Kai-shek Government at that time. Besides, it was the main cause for the invasion of Japan into Myanmar. Therefore, Ledo Road had played an important role in the Second World War. Why and how the Road was constructed, not only the political but also the social and economic effects on the people along the Road till nowadays will be emphasized in this research paper.

**Keywords:** Ledo Road, Japanese, Burma, USA, British, Social and economic effects

### I. Introduction

In WW II, there were two contending forces Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis and Allied Nations including Soviet Union. In the early stage of the war, Japan did not enter it. At that time, Japan gave high attention to Sino-Japanese War being waged within China. Even prior to such events as mentioned above, Japan was much interested to control China economically. Manchuria in September, 1931, formed a puppet Government with Henry Buyi as its head in March 1932, and in September 1932, Manchuria was declared independent. After the annexation of Manchuria, Japan waged, by 1937, an all-out war against China. Very soon, Japanese forces occupied the northern part of China, compelling the Chinese Government to abandon Nanking city (Nanjing).<sup>†</sup> In 1938, they rapidly occupied China's southern sea-ports including Shanghai and Canton (Gaungdong). Because of the Japanese offensive, China's Chaing Kai-shek Government had to retreat to Chongqing while Chinese communists were fleeing to the Mongolian border.<sup>‡</sup>

By 1940, Japanese forces could occupy Chinese capital, many seaports and other regions with dense population and developing industries. Then, they, in order to annex the whole China, tried to cut off almost all of the roads. In doing so, they were successful, and only two communication lines were left open; one was the Sino-Burma (Myanmar) Road and another, the road from Indo-China,<sup>§</sup> that were supportive to Chaing's Government to be able to stand on. Japan well understood how much the road linking China and Myanmar was important militarily even during the time when its war with China was being fought.

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<sup>†</sup> Donovan Webster, **The Burma Road**, New York, Straus and Giroux, 2003, pg. 22-23 (Hereafter cited as "Burma Road")

<sup>‡</sup> တပ်မတော်သမိုင်း (1824-1945) (History of Tatmadaw (1824-1945), Vol. I, Yangon, Government Press, 1994, p. 105 (Hereafter cited as 'History of Tatmadaw', Vol. I)

<sup>§</sup> *History of Tatmadaw*, Vol. I, p. 105

The one called 'Burma Road' is said to be in use since ancient times by Chinese and Myanmar envoys.\* In fact, the main cause for the construction of Burma Road based on the old Silk Road was that the best out-let for China was no other than the way from Yunnan, its south-west province, to Myanmar. Meanwhile, Myanmar was a British colony, and therefore it was quite easy for the British Burma Government to agree and confirm its construction. The construction was begun by the end of 1937 from China's side, based on a road linking Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, and Wangting-Kyukok through Tali and Sium-kwan. When it reached Kyukok, it got connected with Lashio-Muse-Nam Kham road of Myanmar side. The road was opened officially on 10<sup>th</sup> January, 1939. In the same year, the U.S could send military supplies to China from Yangon port via the road.†

Since there was no other way to transport what they wanted to provide to Chaing's Government, the Allied Forces had to use the Sino-Burma road though it was much rough and full of dangers. The road, being built through mountain-tops, had many zigzag turns. For the proper flow of water under and along the road, about 2,000 zigzag drainages were made, and over 300 bridges were built. A 715-mile, two-lane track that between the southwest Chinese city of Kunming and the railhead city of Lashio in Myanmar, the road was a major conduit for goods headed for China.‡

At that time Shanghai's harbor was soon under Japanese control. And with Shanghai's harbor finally closed to outside commerce, the most populous nation on earth was being strangled. No new goods could flow in or out of the country by sea. All of China's international trade was now forced to enter the country overland.§ Up to the end of July 1940, Indo-china road was used for transporting a half of all supplies by the US, and Burma Road for one-thirds. Regarding the transportation, Japan was highly dissatisfied and at last demanded the British Burma government to close it. On 24 June 1940, the Japanese demanded the Burma Road be closed for three months and it was agreed by the British.\*\* During a period of 3 months when the Sino-Burma Road was closed, international and war situation changed. The Japanese armies having occupied many Chinese sea-ports, the Chinese Government moved its head office to Chongqing.††

## II. British war of retreat

Due to the military offensive by the Japanese forces, the British troops started retreating from Yangon on 29 March 1942. At the press conference held at the Royal Hotel in New Delhi, General Well said that there were still fighting in all over Myanmar, and revealed his inspiration that the British would reoccupy Burma from the hands of the Japanese. He also remarked that Burma was particularly important for re-entering into China by the British troops. He continued that they were forced to leave

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\* Ibid

† Burma Road, p. 24

‡ Burma Road, 24

§ Burma Road, p.23

\*\* Ludu U Hla, သတင်းစာကပြောတဲ့စစ်အတွင်းဗမာပြည် (Burma during the War as said by newspapers), Vol. I, Mandalay, Kyee- bwa-yay Press, 1969, p. 19 (Hereafter cited as U Hla, Burma during the war)

†† Thakin Lwin, ဂျပန်ခေတ်ဗမာပြည် (Japanese Era of Burma), Yangon, Thiha Press, 1969, p. 61. (Hereafter cited as Thakin Lwin, Japanese Era of Burma)

Burma, and it was a great shame for them and so the reasons should be found out why they were defeated. He solemnly explained to the media that, if the reasons found and from them taken lessons, they would be able to re-occupy Myanmar.\*

### III. The Allied Forces' counter offensive

The Fascist Axis comprising Germany, Italy and Japan, by 1943-44, turned into defensive condition from that of offensive, and the democratic allies gained victories, launching counter-offensives. † As regards Myanmar, the Third Washington Conference held at Washington in May 1943 decided to re-occupy Northern Burma (Myanmar). Again at the Conference held in Quebec, Canada, in August of the same year, it was decided to open the South-East Asia Command for the re-occupation of Northern Burma. Lord Lewis Mountbatten was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Command on 26 August 1943.

### IV. Ledo Road

General Stilwell therefore made a proposal for construction of an all-season road from India to China via Myanmar. It crosses the broad bowl of the Upper Chindwin, threads the Hukawng and Mogaung valleys, and so goes down to Bhamo and the Burma Road. ‡ Thus, Ledo Road construction was started by American engineers in November 1942. The Ledo Road was intended to be the primary supply route to China and was built under the direction of General Stilwell from the railhead at Ledo (Assam, India) to Mong-Yu road junction where it joined the Burma Road. In the construction work, a total of 35,000 troops from Myanmar, India, British and Chinese were involved. The soldier-labourers toiled in that hard task since the route ran through deep forests and high mountains. Naturally, many a lives were lost! It was ridiculed “the road was built with a rate of sacrifice – A Man’s Life for Every Mile.”§

The highway built across Pat-Kwai Pass was called Ledo up to 1945. It was renamed after a small town – Ledo which was situated at the place where Bengal-Assam Rail Road ended. The road ran down to Shin-bwe-yan, twisting and bending lofty mountain tracks. When it was connected with Myitkyina–Bamaw part, General Chaing Kai-shek renamed it “Stilwell Road,” in honour of General Stilwell who led and supervised its construction. In spite of its completion, the Americans no longer used the road since October, 1945.\*\*

In the task of building Ledo Road, thousands of human lives were lost, and it cost USD 37 million. The lengths of each part of the whole road were: 38 miles in Indian Territory, 646 miles in Myanmar’s and 359 miles in China’s. The road seemed to be a

\*Maung Wun Tha, စတိုးဝဲလ်နှင့်မြန်မာပြည်စစ်မျက်နှာ (Battle field from Myanmar), Yangon, Thiha Ratana Press, 2004, p 62.

†Geoffrey Matthews, 1966. **The Reconquest of Burma**, 1943-44, Gale & Polden, p. 100 (Hereafter cited as Geohrey Matthews, Reconquest of urma)

‡ The Campaign in Burma, London, The Whitefriars Press, 1946, p. 79 (Hereafter cited as “ Campaign in Burma”)

§The Burma-Ledo-Stillwell Road, tinalewisrowe.com

\*\*Stilwell Road, www.britannica.com

huge lying dragon stretching a total length of 1079 miles. It consisted of 465 mile long part called Ledo alias Stilwell, and 614 mile long Burma Road.\*

### V. The road constructed with hardships

Since the road construction was urgently started, preliminary measures were not thoroughly taken to survey its route. Therefore, the work force solved the problems arising out of the construction work sites as properly as possible.

The weather along Ledo Road was sometimes too warm and other times too cold. One could not even breath at places in the deeps, suffocating, and one would not endure the smell too foul to breath when one had to pass through the places with plenty of swamps. The most endangering evil to the working groups was ‘malaria’. When it rained it was much difficult to control the rain-water as it usually was heavy. While fogs came, almost all could not be seen as those were much heavy. Even under such weather and ground conditions, it was said that the developer’s objectives was to complete one mile a day. To liberate North Burma and reopen an enduring line of communication with China there had to be a Ledo Road.† General Stilwell’s task of Ledo Road construction was not merely a road construction work. While implementing the task, his construction corps had to fight enemies whenever and wherever necessary, and yet to have assistance by the American-trained Chinese 22nd and 38th Divisions.‡

As soon as the Chinese troops got rid of the Japanese, route finder did their work, being guarded by soldiers. Then the graders climbed up flanked by tanks, grading the ground.

All the workers or labourers had to shoulder rifles in addition to their construction tools and appliances. Though there were troops to guard them, the Japanese soldiers were almost always waiting for good moments to attack on them, and as soon as they had such an opportunity, they often used the tactics of ‘hit and run’. At such times being attacked, they did not have time to shoot back, and so they fought with their shovels or whatever they had in their hands.§ In the Ledo construction work, many ethnic groups were involved – Chinese, Indians, Chins, Kachins, Gurkhurs, Nagas etc. This said that those involved about 20,000 labourers or workers. In one camp 2,000 labourers spoke 200 different dialects. According to the data collected later, there involved altogether 10 engineering and construction regiments in the task. The most shocking work the corps performed was the construction of two big mid-jungle airfields besides a military hospital, workshops, godowns and big garages and leath machine keeping houses. Eighty per cent of the engineer company at the spearhead of the road went sick.\*\*

Stilwell resolved to reopen the Burma Road, but it took nearly two years before he could launch a major offensive. This was due largely to Myanmar’s low priority from the British perspective. The Americans thought Myanmar was important to their goal of keeping China in the war and ultimately prevailed –though only after alternative

\*Ledo Road, en.m.wikipedia.org

† The Campaign in Burma, p.80

‡ Ibid, p 80

§Thaung Wai Oo, မြန်မာပြည်မှအင်္ဂလိပ်-ဂျပန်တိုက်ပွဲများ (Anglo-Japanese Battles on Myanmar Land), Yangon, Mya-ya-da-na Press, 2009, p. 433 (Hereafter cited as Thaung Wai Oo, Anglo-Japanese Battles)

\*\* The Campaign in Burma, p. 82

strategies, such as diverting supplies to Chennault's air force in China, failed. The appointment of Vice Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten as Supreme Allied Commander in the region was also instrumental in equipping an invasion force to retake Myanmar. Administratively, Stilwell was in a nearly impossible position, with responsibility to Mountbatten, Chiang Kai-shek, and the US Joint Chiefs of Staff.\* After many delays, however, the Allied offensive began in January 1944. Among the American forces Stilwell commanded were the famous three thousand "Merrill's Marauders". Like the British Chindits, the Marauders were involved in long-range penetration movements. In August the Allies captured the important north Myanmar city of Myitkyina after a brutal seventy-two-day siege. After Myitkyina the Japanese were on the defensive. In January 1945 the Ledo Road opened from Assam, India through Myitkyina, Bamaw, and Namkham in Myanmar before connecting with the old Burma Road at Mong-Yu Junction near Wanting in southern China. There was now a supply line into China.†

## VI. The Ledo Road and World War II

When the process of battles in Myanmar is studied, it is found that the general situation might have been different if General Stilwell had not been involved in the campaign. Whatever weakness General Stilwell had, he had already been recognized and recorded in history as a daring war hero forever.‡

General Slaim, in his War Memoirs, wrote in Stilwell's honour:

The capture of Myitkyina, so long delayed, marked the complete success of the first stage of Stilwell's campaign. It was also the largest seizure of enemy-held territory that had yet occurred. Throughout the operations the Allied forces, Chinese, British and American, had been vastly superior to the Japanese on the ground and in the air, even without including the Chinese Yunnan armies. This superiority was only achieved because the main Japanese forces were held locked in the vital Imphal battle, and any reinforcements they could rake up were fed into that furnace. The Japanese had the advantages of position and communications, but even their desperate courage and defensive skill could not hold back such a numerical preponderance. Yet, when all was said and done, the success of this northern offensive was in the main due to the Ledo Chinese divisions—and that was Stilwell.§

Thus, the British and their allies who were driven out of Myanmar during the WW II, could re-annexing Myanmar. Despite their successful re-entry into Myanmar, the British were no longer able to control and administer the land and its people. It did happen since they had to face Myanmar's intensive striving for national independence that had been the case even before the war, deterioration of Myanmar's economy due to the four drastic years of war, and their loss of military and political dignity due to being invaded by the Japanese forces. Within three years after the war ended, Myanmar and India regained their national independence.

\* Ministry of defence, မောင့်ဘက်တန်အစီရင်ခံစာ (Mountbatten Report), Yangon, Government Press, 1957, p.106 (Hereafter cited as "Mounbatten Report")

† Kenton Clymer, **A Delicate Relationship: The United States and Burma/Myanmar since 1945**, London, Cornell University Press, 2015, p. 15 (Hereafter cited as Clymer, A delicate Relation)

‡ Aung Than, မြန်မာပြည်သိမ်းတိုက်ပွဲ (Battle for Burma), Yangon, Khine Mye Aung Sarpay, 986, p. 134

§ William Slim, **Defeat into victory**, London, Four Square Books Limited, 1960 (Reprinted), 281 (Hereafter cited as "Slim: Defeat into victory")

## VII. Significance of the Ledo Road

### (a) Shin-bwe-yang

Shin-bwe-yang, highly known for its existence where, during the World War II, the allied forces stationed their military base, and through which the Ledo Road was constructed, was once a Naga village, namely Tawaha. It is said that the small village was named after Tawa Creek that flows by it. Even the word ‘Tawa’ is Naga meaning the original settlement of old-time Nagas. The name Shin-bwe-yang was started using by Kachins just after the arrival of Christian missionaries. Shin-bwe-yang originally means the place where ‘Yone’ trees grew abundantly. It is known that the village was first called Sin-bwe-yang in Kachin and later changed into Shin-bwe-yang. It encompasses 1254 square miles, ranging about 34 miles from east to west, and about 35 miles from north to south.\*

With the construction work of Ledo Road, the name, Shin-bwe-yang became famous. The Allied Forces, often passing through a number of mountain ranges, arrived at the very first plain land, Shin-bwe-yang. The Forces decided to set up a strong military base there together with an air field. Japanese forces knew the decision and what the Allied Forces were doing there, the former made several attempts to destroy the latter’s military base, and so the place became a hard and cruel battle ground. Meanwhile, the Allied Forces made Chinese army to defend the Japanese offensives, and consequently, thousands of Chinese troops fell around the place.

### (b) Socio-economic effects in Shin-bwe-yang

Shin-bwe-yang was once a small village with less than 100 huts. It’s inhabitants’ livelihood was hill-side farming, and Ta-wun creek-side gold panning. In fact, they had lived on those two. Gradually, as the area of gold panning work stretching farther and wider, and raw gold production volume getting bigger, the village became more and more populous with those who rushed there from different corners of the country. It was, at least, by 2006, upgraded to a town-level by the Ministry of Home Affairs. However, there are only 700 houses in the town proper.†

Panning for gold is usually started just after the water-level of the creek falls when winter comes. The creeks around there usually silted in annual terms, and the local folks began to pan for gold at such period. It had been, in fact, their annual habitual work of gold panning just after the end of their hill-side farming work. Since it had been their traditional method of gold panning work, their social or natural environment was not of great alteration, nor enormous impact on them. They being of less greed and lagged development, had lived in such a way of life as mentioned until early 1990s.

Then, the ethnic people of Shin-bwe-yang, Nagas, who could use traditional methods of gold panning had to quickly retreat as the people bringing machineries, huge volume of money capital, rushed into the area for gold processing with modern methods. At

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\* Township General Administration Department, ရှင်ဗွေယန်မြို့ဒေသဆိုင်ရာအချက်အလက်များ (Facts concerning Shin-bwe-yang Town), April 18, 2015, p. 2 (unpublished)(Hereafter cited as “Facts concerning Shin Bwe Yang Town”)

† Facts concerning Shin-bwe-yang Town, p. 2

first, small entrepreneurs with single-face machines, hiring local labourers, began to make gold processing very competitively. Since then did enter the area the people from different towns of rural areas of different regions, and by 2003 or 2004, many more investors and labourers had got there.\* Due to the all-round circumstances of the area where its population got more and more denser, and different livelihoods appeared, Shin-bwe-yang was again upgraded to the level of a sub-township by 2006-2007. It is learnt that the gold processing work, at that time well-known as Tanaing gold, originated from Shin-bwe-yang and Sha-ya-zut areas, and that Tanaing, in those days, was much developed with many traders.

In the later period of the golden time of the area, a number of gold processing companies with official licenses, competitively came to work there. The most distinct among them were Shwe Wa, Thwe, Yadana Hein, Northern Star and Bu-gar Companies. They holding power and license to work for the trade, gold processing, the local folks who had the only knowledge of gold panning out-dated and handy method of gold processing had no other option than to shift their work to farther places. Also due to the heavy machinery work of gold processing by those companies, the farm-lands of the local folks were covered with silted mud deposits, and consequently their farm-work totally failed. The farmers being unable to continue their farming business, had unavoidable to sell their farmlands to the gold mining and processing entrepreneurs, leaving themselves as the farm-land losers. Then they became farm toiling workers. In the same way, the local gold panning people with traditional methods were automatically compelled to become company workers, or sub-contractors subsidized by the licensed companies or migrant employment seekers. While working as gold-processing workers, they were categorized into two; one as daily waged mining workers who had to enjoy kyat 3000 per day, and another as mining worker-partner who would be given the one-thirds share of gold mined daily by the employer-miner.†

Gold processing in Shin-bwe-yang as getting greater, it was done not only at the creek-side, but farther around the area with bull dozers and Balfours also resulting in all-round damages including the appearance of forest-turn-plains. Shin-bwe-yang at that time was one of the much over crowded places in the area. Most of the migrant workers there were from Sagaing, Shwe-bo, Kyun-hla and Da-se. Because of the companies, collaborated with governing power, that conducted gold processing in that vast area, Nagas who had resided there for many years and lived on traditional farming had no other choice than to shift to some upper areas of Khamti Creek, having sold their farm-lands. To say exactly, Na-sin, Lam-pon, Ta-nga, Ka-kow, Lum-ma-yan, Sam-lon, Naung-chein and Chan-Chein villages of Nagas inevitably moved to the areas further north of the Khamti Creek, to continue their livelihood hill-side farming.

The more commercialized the gold-processing in the area, the many more people rushed into it. They included gold-dealers, pedestrians, illicit drug dealers, gambling masters, and all sorts of different traders, and they did arrive along the Ledo Road. As they entered the area, the type of its social formation changed. The normal or general formation of a gold processing area includes workers or labourers who are about half of its population, its about 20% gambling dens owners, 15% gold miners (persons who

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\* Interview with U Ke Tan (Naga ethnic), Shin bwe yan, (15 March 201)

† Interview with U Ke Tan,(Naga ethnic), Shin-bwe-yang, 15 March 2016

are the sub-contractors subsidized by the official licenses) and others being vendors, opium-dealers, karaoke, message, liquor or food shop runners.\*

At present, the gold processing work around Shin-bwe-yang has already become shrink. However, the work is still being heavily functioned at the area where Ta-won Creek originates, and flocks of processing workers are still racing towards there. Gold processing around Shin-bwe-yang becomes lesser and lesser due to greedy extraction and it has naturally been moved to places where more gold can be mined, leaving the area with much damage to the natural environment. Thick forests were ruined, turned into plains with uneven surface and thousands of big holes. Together with the rapid drop of gold processing business there, other trades affiliated with it also dwindled. Diesel sale for Belfour and other engines used for gold mining and processing got less, food shops and restaurants, garments or other accessories shops almost all closed. Previously, the town population exceeded 7000, and it is said more than half of them were Bamars came from central Myanmar. When the gold processing business terminated, they decided to settle in there with any livelihood they could be involved in. There were two reasons for the rapid dwindling of gold processing in Shin-bwe-yang – one was the plots for the work got lesser and lesser, the other was the finding of amber and its mining in Ta-naing. Amber extraction, quite different from gold processing, was much beneficial to its workers. They, as gold processing workers or labourers, had to toil as waged ones under gold entrepreneurs. But now, they themselves became employers as the nature of amber extraction was self-work-and-get basis. Naturally they did go to Ta-naing, leaving Shin-bwe-yang, a business-dry place. Since the labour-rarity occurred, cost of gold processing work increased, and the trade finally became more and more limited. And at the same time, the remaining few plots were processed with heavy machines, and therefore the need for labour became less and less, resulting in the disappearance of the dependent enterprises on gold mining and processing.†

On the way to gold mining plots, the works of carrying earth-blocks, melting them with water, diggings etc., were seen. To reach the plots, deep holes and steep tunnels were passed through. Of course, those were the concrete evidences of failed environment of the whole area. It was learnt that the quality of gold from Sha-ra-zut and that from Shin-bwe-yang were different.

On the way back from those blocks, the old airfield that was constructed during the WWII was studied. Since it was an important one while the Ledo Road was built, its remaining clues would surely lead to its historical facts. Though its whole area did no longer exist, the run-way could still be seen, thanks to those authorities concerned who tried their best to prevent it. When asked why the airfield could not be maintained, one folk ensured that most of its area was within the limits of gold processing plots. The place, even though it was not adjacent to the town, was not left for gold mining and processing.

### **(c) Mang-khun or the starting point of Hu Kaung Town**

Also studied on the way back from Shin-bwe-yang was an old town, Mang-khun which was famous during the British colonial period. It is not far away from Ta-naing. It was

\* Interview with U Ba Sein, Naga ethnic, Shin Bwe Yan, 15 March 2016

† Interview with U Maung Hla, Rakhine ethnic, Shin bwe yan, 15 March 2016

a historically long-standing city in the time of Myanmar Kings, and also in that of colonial days was recognized as a town. As it was a populous city, there were a considerable number of stupas and pagodas in and around it. Unfortunately, the area, once settled in by Shan nationals, was a battle ground during the WW II, being turned into a ruined one. After the World War, and just after the independence, it became a victim of the civil war. Due to such bitter events happened there, Mang-khun could not convalesce up to these days.

The journey from Ta-naing to Mang-khun took only half an hour as its distance being 13 miles. When arrived at a monastery in a village near the old town, some villagers were found, and asked about the town, Mang-khun. It was unfortunate that most of them were new arrivals to the village that had already ruined, and so they did not know well about it. Among them was found a native villager who had some knowledge about the old town and its surrounding areas. He took us around and related what he had learned about the town, Ledo Road and Mang-khun's wooded lands. It is invaluable to learn about the locality from him.

He led us to the ruined village where wood thickly covered. Timber extraction was made too, it was learnt. Only few huts were found. He told us that last 5 years ago, some Japanese war-veterans came there to find the grave-stones of two Japanese officers who fell in Mang-khun during WW II. They found them and installed new ones for the fallen.

The villager said, "The places were where we roamed hunting, sometimes felling trees, and at times we found aborted bombs and cartridges of war-time. When asked if the Ledo Road passed by Mang-khun as in the books were written that a bridge, a part of the road, was built a little bit upper site of the place where two Ta-wan creeks meet, he replied, "The road in the wood is the old Ledo Road." Interestingly, we disposed rubbishes and rotten woods, and happened to see the route of the road some spots of which were still covered with tar. The thing now known to be Ledo being constructed straight by means of modern engineering, its old route had to lie under woods and forests, and it is hard to find in these days. As we reached entrance of the village, rice fields are found stretching far outwards, and bits of old Ledo's route were seen hither and thither. On the way back from Mang-khun, *Pa-yin* (Amber) trading between the motor-cyclists who brought the stones from amber mines and the buyers waiting the cyclists was studied. Many cyclists bringing amber rode down in groups. Most of them were homeless, staying in temporary tents or huts that they hired. They sold what they got, bought fish or meat or vegetables, or fast food. After they fed, they went for watching video shows, and at last slept to restart their day-round lives the next day. Even along the road-side between Mang-khun and Ta-naing were the people sitting on some stools, waiting to buy amber stones from the stone-collectors. Some did not sell to those who came to the collecting sites. Instead, they went to the amber market in Ta-naing the next day. However, others had to sell the stones they collected just beside the village to feed themselves instantly.\*

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\* Interview with Ko Notoo, Mang Khun village, 15 March 2016

#### (d) Beginning of Ta-naing history

Previously, Ta-naing was known as the Hu Kaung-Ta naing area or Hu Kaung area. It is said the area was settled in by the earliest Naga migrants. Later it was the area of Shan settlers. Even the word Hu Kaung is a Shan dialect 'Hu' means 'head', and 'Kong', 'drum'. It is believed that the town was first set up by a brother of Mogaung Saobwa Lon-main-kon toward which the 'Drum's Head' lay. By 1958, the government office was established at Tain-kauk village. In the same year, there appeared Hu Kaung Myo (town), Hu Kaung Mountain Area. By 1962 when the Revolutionary Council Government came to power, the area turned Hu Kaung Myo (town) and later Hu Kaung Township. It is learnt, in 1967, the area was named Ta-naing after Ta-naing Creek where it flows into the Upper most part of Chindwin River. However, in some office papers are yet found the name Hu Kaung.

The whole area of Ta-naing Township is over 600 square miles. As per the 2015 census, its population is nearly 35,000. Of the populace, Kachin tribes total 20,000, and the second largest is Naga, totaling nearly 6300.\* The place was well-known for its gold mines. The particular locations where gold deposits were found were Ton-ma-lee, Wi-ti, Wi-naw, Pan-ka, Yet-ma, Ta-gwum, Taw-lay, Won-mala and Nan-gon village of Lower Ta-naing Creek, and , Tain-gaw, Ka-du-ywan, Sharan-gum, Wa-kan-zut and Khamom-chan village of Upper Ta-naing Creek. Also in Nam-byu and Nom-kham areas, those were Ra-mut, Aung-jut, Pan-gyi, Kap-sa, Chaung-phar, Nam-nar, Lon-kyat, Guam-pai, Dain-gyum, Sut-kyaing, Wi-lin, and Tain-gaw. The main gold-mining companies were 'Season Star' and 'Thway'.†

Ta-naing though lies in the Hu Kaung Valley, it is a plain-land around which mountains exist, and through which creeks flow. Those mountain-ranges and creeks can be said as its vital resources. It was once an area of Shans, but Mang-khuan village disappeared as the civil-war raged the area, resulting in the loss of the area by Shans. They were replaced by Kachins. It seems to happen that, when the demand for formation of Kachin State rose, it was finally given in, and as a result of it there started occur drastic quarrels, disputes and fights between Shans, the original settlers, and Kachins, the newly migrating people who rushed down from their native hills and mountain ranges to the areas. Under such circumstances, it was more or less concerned with the wit and far-sightedness of a Kachin leader, Horwa Duwa M. Khun-Pon. It is said that M. Khun-Pon, seeing that Kachin people living in Shan state were growing more and more, when he went out on an expedition tour to Hu Kaung Valley by 1950. After thoroughly studying the valley, he began a plan to drive Kachin from their native land to Hu Kaung. At the very outset, he could bring over 150 households there. It is learnt that the migrants began their resettlements by setting up a village called Tain-kauk near Ta-naing. The historic shift was encouraged and assisted by the famous Kachin leaders – Sama Duwa Sin-Wa-Naung and Duwa Zaw-yit. Then, Kachins gradually moved there, tribes after tribes.‡ Just after the formation of Kachin State was approved by the Union Government, Kachin nationals' expedition was systematically

\* Township General Administration Department, တနိုင်းမြို့ဒေသဆိုင်ရာအချက်အလက်များ (Facts concerning Ta-naing Township), (unpublished), 2015, p. 6.

† Interview with U Maung Hla, 15 March 2016

‡ Myitkyina News Journal, Vol. 3, No. 5, pp. 12-13.

done, and it is clearly found that Hu Kaung Valley became overwhelmed by Kachins, the new settlers rather than Shans the natives.\*

### **(e) The land of amber**

Ta-naing, now becoming a land of amber was much known as that of gold in some previous years. The land is the meeting point between its upper part, Shin bwe yang, and its lower part, Sha-ra-zut, where gold is much deposited. So was Ta-naing, a golden land though its fame for the metal was short-lived. It was between 1990 and 2008, and during that period it was so highly crowded that, along its main road, were congested with people whose bodies touching and pushing one another for moving forward, especially in the evenings. After the waning of gold era, came that of amber. Since the business of amber excavation and processing became successful and popular, the area again got over crowded.

The most famous amber mines in the earlier time were Zee-byu-kon and Aung-ba. The earlier found amber mines provided high quality pieces, and their mining was highly expensive. In amber mining, it is said that a hole of 4 feet square is to be dug down even 500 feet or more to reach amber layer. When digging down, hard-rock layers are often found, and to reach amber layer, they are to be disposed. Such diggings are usually done without any certainty to find or reach amber layer at the cost of near kyat 300 lakhs for a hole. When a hole is successful and amber deposits found, a labourer fastened with belt has to go down by rope and pulley system. He has to carefully keep himself straight so that his body or limbs must not touch the rocky walls of the hole to avoid getting injured. It is a much risky work and for such dangerous risk, Lisu ethnic from Mogoke are experts. Since the work is similar to that of ruby mining, Lisu with such expertise, in considerable numbers rushed to the place.

However high the cost of digging a single hole was, the entrepreneur operated the work, because, if a considerable size of amber was mined, the cost spent would be covered. However, much care is to be taken to lift the piece of amber to the ground. First, it is to be wrapped up with cloth soaked up with water, and then only be it slowly lifted up lest it be otherwise cracked and broken. As mentioned above, Lisu being the most skilled for the work, Ta-naing area became the meeting place of Lisu from Putao and those of Mogoke.†

As Zee-byu-gon and Nyaung-bin-gon amber mines fading, Aung-ba and Nant-kun became famous for their amber blocks worth kyat 100 million or more. Nevertheless, an entrepreneur could not run even a hole if he did not hold at least kyat 50 million in his hand. Therefore, the business was just for the rich only.

However, some amber mines found near old Mang-khuan Village last four or five year ago were different from other ones. There, amber deposits could be reached after digging just a depth of a human height five or six feet. So, people from almost all corners of the country came there in great haste since every one could dig holes if one could merely bring a grub hoe. Some came from central and upper regions, some from afar such as Rakhine State (western part of Myanmar), others like Lisu both from

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\* Interview with U Kason Wanaw, Kachin ethnic, Ta-naing town, 16 March 2016

† Interview with U Maung Hla, Rakhine ethnic, 15 March 2016

Mogoke and Putao. Those who were working under gold miners came to the place where they could get as much as they labored.

It is assumed that the amber deposits, easily found when one has to dig only 6 or 7 feet depth, were probably brought to the present places by water flow of rivers or creeks, and when the flow happened to diversify the rivers or creeks it might become silted up, leaving the amber deposits at those places. Usually, amber deposits are found only when the holes are dug over 500 feet deep. But now when the holes are dug as in the past, amber is not found. In contrary, it is needed to dig only 5 to 10 feet deep to reach the deposits though their quality is not as high as of those from Aung-ba or Zee-byu-gon mines. Nevertheless, almost all of the amber searchers were able to live on what they got, and some of them who could save part of what they got might have a sum for their future investment in certain business.

#### **(f) Amber market**

Amber is not a kind of metal but only a formation derived from trees. It might be last 50 million years or so ago that the resin left by big pine trees fallen and sunk under earth turned into amber after the material had been in the different stages of pressured and heat. Many kinds of fossils in the forms of leaves, ants, bees or bumblebees can be found in amber. It is said that some amber are over 300 million years old.

The earliest record about Myanmar amber is found in some ancient Chinese Chronicles of A.D first century. Since such terms as “... gold, silver and amber mines . . .” are found in Myanmar Chronicle\*, it is clear Myanmar monarchs were much interested in the material and valued it. It has been regarded as one of the nine most valuable gems in Myanmar language called ‘Na-warat-koe-par’ (nine gems) since early times of Myanmar. For ethnic people, it is believed that amber is naturally empowered to make better blood circulation and cure heart vessel troubles.

Amber stones, lapidary or raw, sell in the amber row of Ta-naing market. Even though low quality piece sold at lower prices can be easily found in the market, highly valued special ones are usually hidden. Such pieces worth over 100 lakhs are kept in the hands of traders or brokers most of whom are Lisu.

Quality of each stone is stipulated by the fossilized insect in it. It is uncertain that a good price can be had if such one is found in a stone. However, the price depends on how the fossilized animal stands in the stone. Since its main market being Chinese, a stone might sell high price if Chinese like the style of the animal’s standing. They will not buy it if the animal’s wing or leg is broken. They do not like the animal if it turns back, or it looks exiting rather than entering.<sup>†</sup>

In addition to such style of fossilized animal in amber, the price also depends on its colour. Amber has different colours – brown-red, orange, green, rosy, violet, white, etc. Amber with Maroon or scarlet colours sells high price. Comparatively, transparent stones are more adored, and the most valued are red transparent. If an amber stone is attributive, it is worth nearly 100,000 kyats and if it has fossilized animal without any flaws, it would be worth more than kyat 50 lakhs. An amber bangle of high attribute

\* ကုန်းဘောင်ဆက်မဟာရာဇဝင်တော်ကြီး (တတိယတွဲ) (Konbaung Set Chronicle III), Yangon, Yar Pyay Offset, 2004, p. 39

† Interview with U Maung Hla, 15 March 2016

would sell at 60 to 100 lakhs. Together with high price usually come artificial ones. At mines, the original places of amber, it is rare to see artificial. But those can be found at Ta-naing market, and so buyers have to be careful when to buy them. It is said great swindlers can make buyers illusory. Eventually, experience only can make right decision in amber trading.

### **VIII. View on war-time Ledo Road**

Ledo is a famous and important road born together with World War II. Though it was constructed during WW II, its construction had been in the mind of the British since early 19<sup>th</sup> century. When it was materialized, the implementers were not the British, but Americans. One of the two reasons why the Americans were allowed to build it was that the latter were the most able ones to implement it as they had enough financial and machinery power to complete the task in accordance with the urgent need of war-time situation. Another reason was that the Americans were much willing to drive out Japanese troops as fast as possible in order to save China from being occupied by the Japanese armies in the northern warfront. In fact, both the Americans and Japanese entry into the WW II was indirectly concerned with that construction.

Penetration into China and its occupation by Japanese troops was much concerned with the latter's entry into the WW II. Even before the war broke out, Japanese troops had already invaded China and occupied many parts of it while Chinese were trying to compel them. Meanwhile, Americans were providing Chinese armies with arms and ammunitions, food and other supplies etc., by using the Sino-Burma Road linking Kunming and Lashio. Consequently, Japanese armies could not meet the end they expected. As Americans were sending supplies from Yangon Port to the northern frontier areas step by step, and then the supplies of all sorts were again sent into Chinese territory along Sino-Burma Road, the Japanese demanded the British to close the road's gate. The British, as they were at that time to face Burmans and Italians in the European theatre, had to give in for about 3 months. Just after a while, Imperial Japan entered the WW II, and occupied one country after another in Southeast Asia very quickly, including Myanmar. As a result of Myanmar occupation, all sorts of supplies to China by the Allied Forces were terminated. Under such circumstances, it was badly needed to reopen the western gate-way to send supplies to Chang Kai-shek Government of China so that the Government could stand on. Because of such things happening, Americans began to make arrangements to save China from being annexed by Japanese forces. One of those arrangements was the construction of an emergency road linking Ledo in India near to Myanmar border and the Sino-Burma Road. In practice, the construction of Ledo Road was started on the first day of December, 1942 by the Allied Forces. It was done by the U.S. Army, General Stilwell, and the road named after him. Its construction was aimed at sending food supplies to China, a strategically important land, since Sino-Burma Road had already been closed by the Japanese. The road passed through Shin-bwe-yang, Myitkyina and Bamaw in Kachin State. The road, when completed, would reach Mong-yu Junction between Lashio and Nam-Kham on Sino-Burma Road.

The Allied Forces, while constructing the Ledo Road, were waging war against the Japanese troop, could reoccupy Mogaung, Myitkyina and Bamaw within a year,

forcing Japanese to withdraw from Myanmar.\* It can, in fact, be seen that the Ledo's role in the past indicated its importance. In the World War Two, it was estimated over 300,000 Chinese troops were lost who fought in collaboration with the Allied Forces. Even a war cemetery was built in the Indian border area for those who fell in the early stage of war fought for Ledo Road. In the attempts by the Americans and Japanese to influence and control China, there in the northern part of Myanmar fought were battles, leaving the land war-ridden. When Japanese armies entered Myanmar, they raised the banner, 'Independence for Myanmar', a sham one just for propaganda. Similarly, the British who were forced out of the country by Japanese troops, and who re-entered Myanmar, driving the Japanese out of it shouted to 'liberate Myanmar' but indeed a lie. Practically, their re-entry into Myanmar was aimed to prop up China's right-wing Government lest it may fall rather than Myanmar's interest. They were therefore interested only to win the battles in northern Myanmar. Chinese troops were deeply involved in the battles along Ledo Road under the direct command of General Stilwell, and after the war, some of them tried to settle in Myanmar while others went back home. After the war when Chinese Communists took power in mainland China, General Chang's Government fled to Taiwan. Meanwhile, some Chang's troops were to enter into the north and northeastern border areas of Myanmar. Eventually, the invading troops and war remnants together fought against Tamadaw troops and even annexed some parts of Myanmar. They were widely known as white-Chinese troop (*Ta Yok Phyu*) who began the notorious invasion of Myanmar. The United States of America, on the other hand who really had attachment to the White-Chinese, continued to support them both materially and spiritually, ignoring Myanmar's sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a result of such acts by the U.S, a considerable area of Myanmar's northern and northeastern parts were temporarily lost to the invaders. Thus, the areas said above became the battle grounds for U.S Government's anti-Chinese Communist movement was created. As such situation occurred, Myanmar Government reported the case to the United Nations. In spite of Myanmar's report concerning the White-Chinese invasion into her territories, the UN Security Council failed to recognize the invasion or to take appropriate action against it. Myanmar, facing such a crucial situation, had no other way than to decide to defend the invasion by herself, standing firmly on her own feet. Myanmar, with all her might and main, fought battles after battles to regain her lost land against the White-Chinese troops. Eventually, Myanmar's just war won over her enemies. Nevertheless, the remnants of the White-Chinese invaders turned themselves into illegal opium dealers – another threat to our national cause.†

### **IX. Ledo Road and current situation**

Last ten years ago, both China and India started to be interested in revitalization of the old Ledo Road. The road, having its route, and even a rough flow, might become a high-way directly connecting the two countries if it were revitalized. It might in fact be much useful for the two in their respective economic development strategies. Even in the time of Myanmar parliament Government, a part of the old road could be used as a linkage between Nam-tu to Ta naing, though that between Ta naing to Shin bwe yang was too hard. Provided the road is rebuilt well, it would create a great linkage among

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\* Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 207

† Kenton Clymer, *A Delicate Relationship*, p. 85-103

the three nations, India, Myanmar and China, leading to a greater business and trade deal among them. At the very outset, Myanmar may enjoy road tax and other revenues only. But in the later times when she can well develop her economy, she would have job opportunities for her citizens, relating to new road. Reasonably, India gets interested in making arrangements for rebuilding of the part between Ledo- Nam-yun while China too is interested in reconstruction of the road so that it might change Yunnan's economic development in ascending trend. It is learnt that India once offered Myanmar Government their support for its rebuilding in their part. In the time of military (Tatmadaw) Government, Yuzana Company was assigned to start building the road. However, the Company's machineries for road construction were destroyed by the insurgent organizations, and the work paused for a time. In recent years, the construction work was restarted by Chinese Company. Anyway, the reconstruction of the old Ledo Road is not an easy task. Since the war raging period, its construction faced hardships, and in those days too it has to encounter different hardships – removal of the existing earth blocks and filling in their places with other earth-blocks brought from afar, and many other preparatory works. At some parts of the route of the old road, deep holes are to be dug as the existing earth quality is not strong enough. Generally, the work does not move forward as expected. It is learnt that even facing the difficulties, the preliminary works of rough road construction has been done 50% by the state budget in 2015.\*

### **X. Ledo and international aspect**

As China has conducted in connection with the reconstruction of the road much ardently, it hopes it would be able to extend its market up to Assam, Manipur and Naga Lands to develop its economy. On the part of India, it seems to have great expectation to export its products to China, when the road construction is completed. Rather than that hope seems that the problem of sending goods to the said states by the Indian central government would be solved if export items from China come into those states at lower transportation cost. Look East policy originally meant a strengthening of India's trading links eastward, but for some it has also come to mean the reorientation of Northeast India as a bridge to Myanmar and China and a solution to the Northeast's long decades of economic isolation.<sup>†</sup> But India seems to be worried that China-made products can flood into the Indian market through the road.<sup>‡</sup>

However, India has another important problem - the Naga rebellion. India regards China as the main encouraging country to the Naga rebellion, and also as the supplies of arms, ammunition and other military aids to the rebels. India seems to be concerned that when the road is completed, China and the rebels it supports would get closer, and the closer relation would threat India's sovereignty.<sup>§</sup> India has not begun to build its side of the road. Therefore, it is seen that India become less interested in the complete reconstruction of Ledo Road.

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\* <http://myitkyina.newsjournal.com.mm/news/detail/156>, November, 2015.

<sup>†</sup> Thant Myint-U, *Where China meets India*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011, pg. 30

<sup>‡</sup> [www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com), Beijing calls for restoration of Stilwell Road connecting India, China, Myanmar (11- 11-2016)

<sup>§</sup> [www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com), Beijing calls for restoration of Stilwell Road connecting India, China, Myanmar (11-11-2016)

Opinion stands divided. Indian businessmen strongly felt that this road, which is now almost unusable and prone to interdiction by insurgents, could be the key for the economic success of the North East. Rebuilding it will help re-establish the region's trade ties with western China and South East Asia. The government, in contrast, sees this as a risky investment, given security concerns with China as well as the challenge of battling insurgent groups currently operating in the region.\*

Regarding Myanmar side, the rough road would be completed up to Shin bwe yang where Kachin State and Upper Chindwin meet. But in the part of Sagaing Division, the road cannot be used yet. For the portion between Shin bwe yang and Myitkyina, motor cycle only can be used to travel, and it costs over kyat 100,000 per ride. At one time, the road in the Sagaing Division portion was said to be built with the finance by India. But now, it seems stalled.

Behind the curtain of the relation between China and India, it seems there has considerable influence on the rebels armed groups roaming about the northern part of Ledo. And on the other hand, those armed groups are playing political games, swinging like pendulum between China and India. India is already watching nervously as China pushes ahead with the re-building of the historic Ledo Road. Local quarrying also affects the geographical balance of the region, which often destabilizes the foundations of the roads laid. So it is still uncertain to which side they would swing, and that swing would decide whether one can dream the future of Ledo.

## XI. Conclusion

Now Ledo road is a crossroad for the ethnic people and neighbouring countries. The main thing for us to consider is the relation between the government and the ethnic arm groups in this area. There needs an equilibrium between Government's peace concept and Union Peace Convention, and the outcome of that equilibrium would effect the nation's stability, including that of the northern part of Myanmar. Among the ethnic people residing along Ledo Road, Kachins and Shans are major residents with Naga as minorities.

Regarding the northern areas along Ledo Road where natural resources are abundant, the areas are likely to suffer from the greed of different armed groups to control them. Thus the area became the cursed ones. The resources compel the armed groups to struggle against one another for taking upper hand to control them, rather than benefiting the country. Resources might be supportive to the needing fund for the armed groups whereas illegal drugs mainly assist able for buying arms and ammunitions. Most of the illegal drugs productions are based in the northern regions, and the illegal trading of natural resources usually happen in those regions. Since the arms-buying has to mainly rely on illegal drugs, the total suppression of illegal drug trafficking and trading as well as that of their utilization is not an easy task. Its consequential impact on the natives is that they become drug-addicts, being victims of drugs. The labour of young people are meaninglessly lost due to their being drug-addicts. The loss in turn makes the nation lose her human resources.

Revitalization of Ledo Road can be seen as a part of China's 'One Belt One Road' policy and programme. However, the development as the outcome of that programme

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\* Shruti Pandalai, China Entices Myanmar as India Struggles to 'Look East', *idsa.in*, 11-4-2011.

can be enjoyed by the ethnic people only when political and social stability prevails. Without such stabilities, no investors would do any risk. Stability would be warmly welcoming economic development and prosperity while instability would lead the people towards poverty and chaos. The local people themselves must resolve that they be able to enjoy the fruits of stability and development. Then and then only will come all-round development including that of tourism and other opportunities. Actually the restoration of the Ledo Road will revitalize the promising path, which will interconnect Southwest China, South Asia and Southeast Asia, and merge the region into an emerging market. The ethnic groups living in this area can seize the chance and prosper. It could be as strategically important for Myanmar and neighbouring countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as it was in the 1940s.

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### **Interviews**

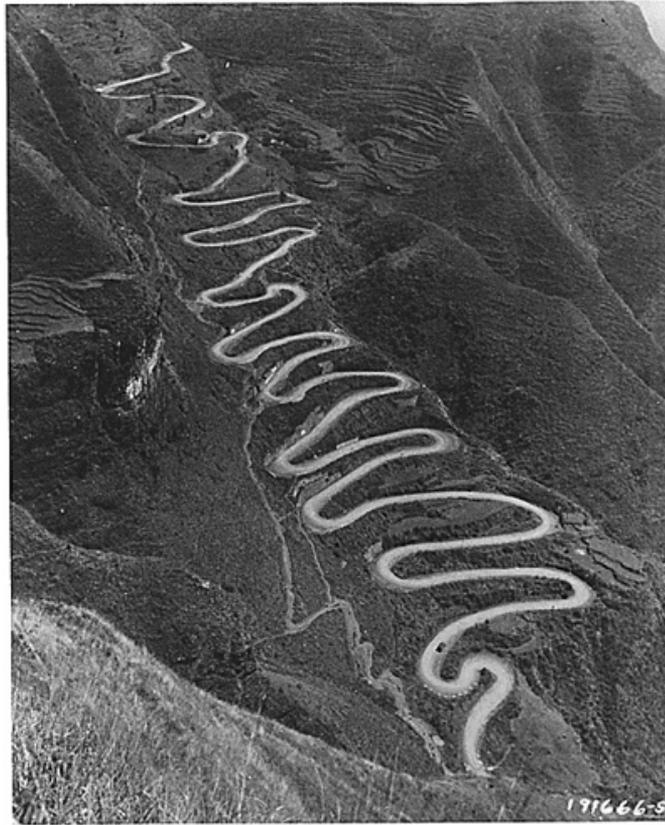
**Interview** with U Ke Tan, (Naga ethnic), Shin bwe yang, 15 March 2016.

**Interview** with U Ba Sein, (Naga ethnic), Shin bwe yan, 15 March 2016.

**Interview** with U Maung Hla, (Rakhine ethnic), Shin bwe yan, 15 March 2016.

**Interview** with Ko Notoo, Mang Khun village, Ta-naing town, 15 March 2016.

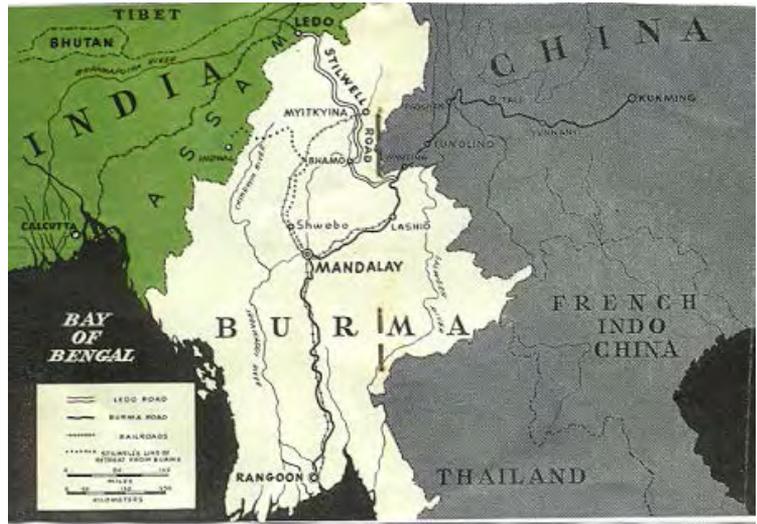
**Interview** with U Kason Wanaw, Kachin ethnic, Ta-naing town, 16 March 2016.



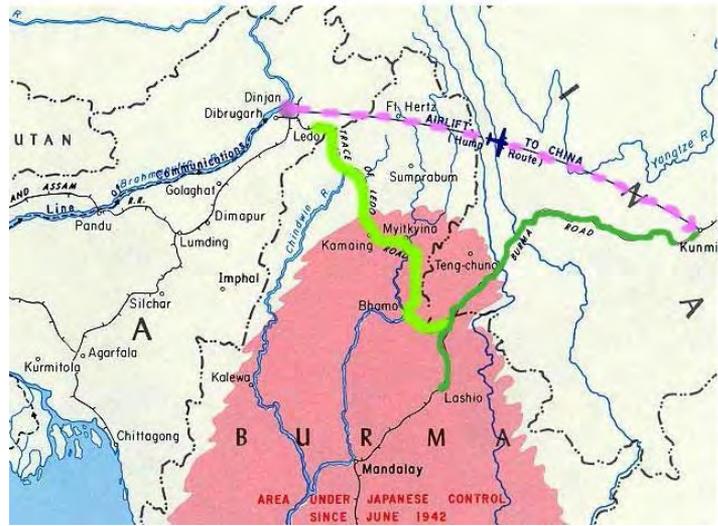
Ledo Road (Source: Internet)



Construction period of Ledo Road (Source: Internet)



Ledo Road map (Source: Internet)



Ledo Road and China-Myanmar Road (Source: Internet)



Ledo Road in the present



Shin-bwe-yan Town



Amble market in Ta-naing



Old airfield in Shin bwe yan (World War II)