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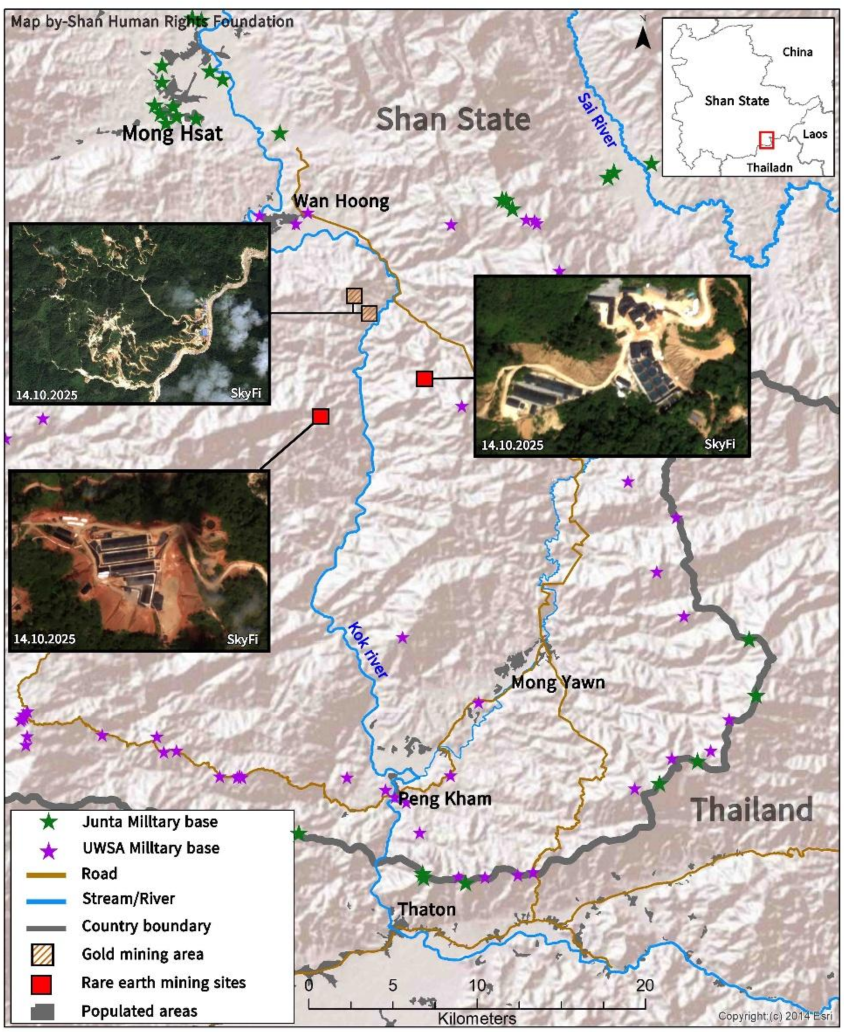
October 28, 2025

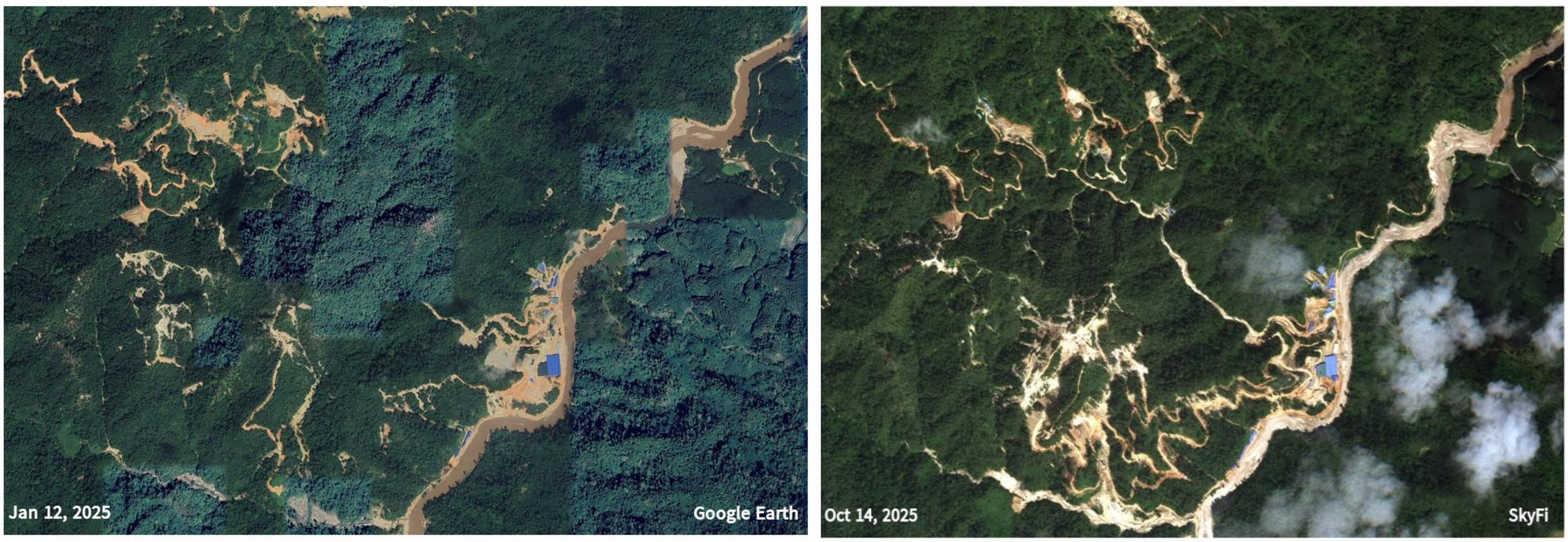
Update: Chinese state-backed company behind expanded rare earth and gold mines along Kok River in eastern Shan State

New satellite images show expansion of rare earth and gold mines along the Kok River in Mong Yawn, southern Mong Hsat township, eastern Shan State, which according to inside sources are operated by China Investment Mining Company, backed by the Chinese government.

Gold and rare earth mines along Kok River in southern Mong Hsat (Oct 14, 2025)



The satellite images were taken on October 14, 2025. The most dramatic change can be seen in the gold mining area 30 kilometers upstream from the Thai border, where an expanded mesh of new roads and mining pits has been gouged into the forested hillsides. The runoff from these mines, containing heavy metals dislodged from the earth, flows down directly into the Kok River. The gold ore continues to be extracted in processing facilities on the western bank of the Kok River, chemical residues from which are likely draining directly into the river.



Gold mining along the Kok River

Since SHRF's [May 15, 2025 update](), the two rare earth mines near the Kok River, one west and one east of the river, have been further developed. Both use the environmentally damaging in-situ leaching process that involves injection of large quantities of chemicals into hillsides.

The May 6, 2025 satellite image of the rare earth mine west of the Kok River showed the circular processing pools still under construction. The latest image of this mine shows these pools have been completed and are now covered by black roofing (but still faintly visible beneath).

Rare earth mine west of Kok River

The eastern rare earth mine, apparently already in operation in January 2025, continues to be operational (with bright blue chemical liquid in rows of processing pools visible through transparent dark covering). The difference is that several new buildings can be seen at the northeast section of the site, showing increased activity.

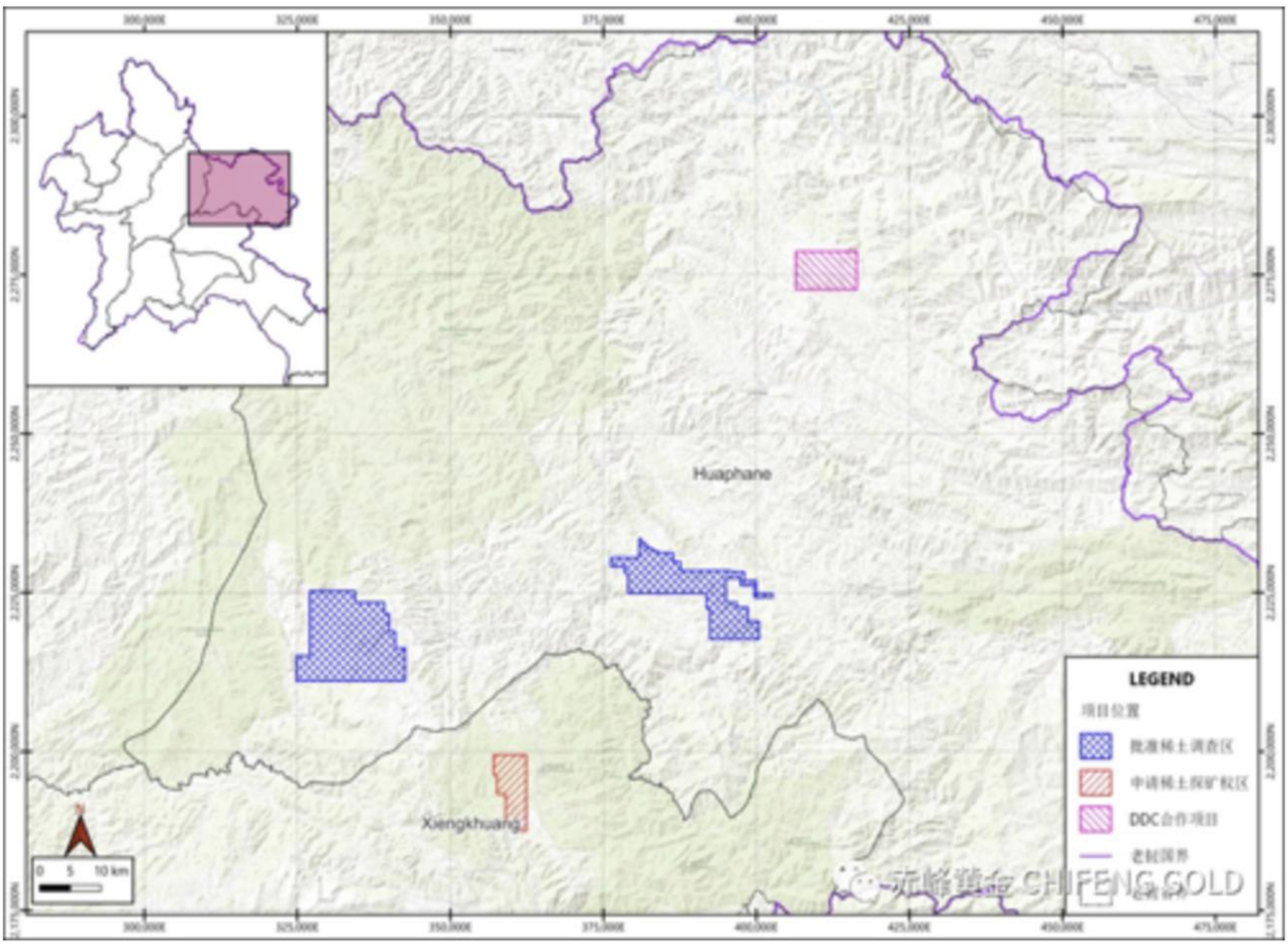
Rare earth mine east of Kok River

The expansion of these three mining sites despite harmful contamination of the Kok River is extremely worrying, given the impact on communities on both sides of the border. This includes over a million Thais living along the Kok River in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces – not to mention the tens of millions living downstream along the Mekong River, of which the Kok is a tributary.

Thai authorities have been testing the water of the Kok River every two weeks since April 2025, and found levels of arsenic and lead above safety standards.

The Mong Yawn area of eastern Mong Hsat township is jointly controlled by the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Burmese military regime, necessitating permission from both entities for the mines to operate. According to inside sources, the operator of both the rare earth mines and the main gold mining operation along the Kok River in Mong Yawn is China Investment Mining Company, which is carrying out rare earth mining in northern Laos.

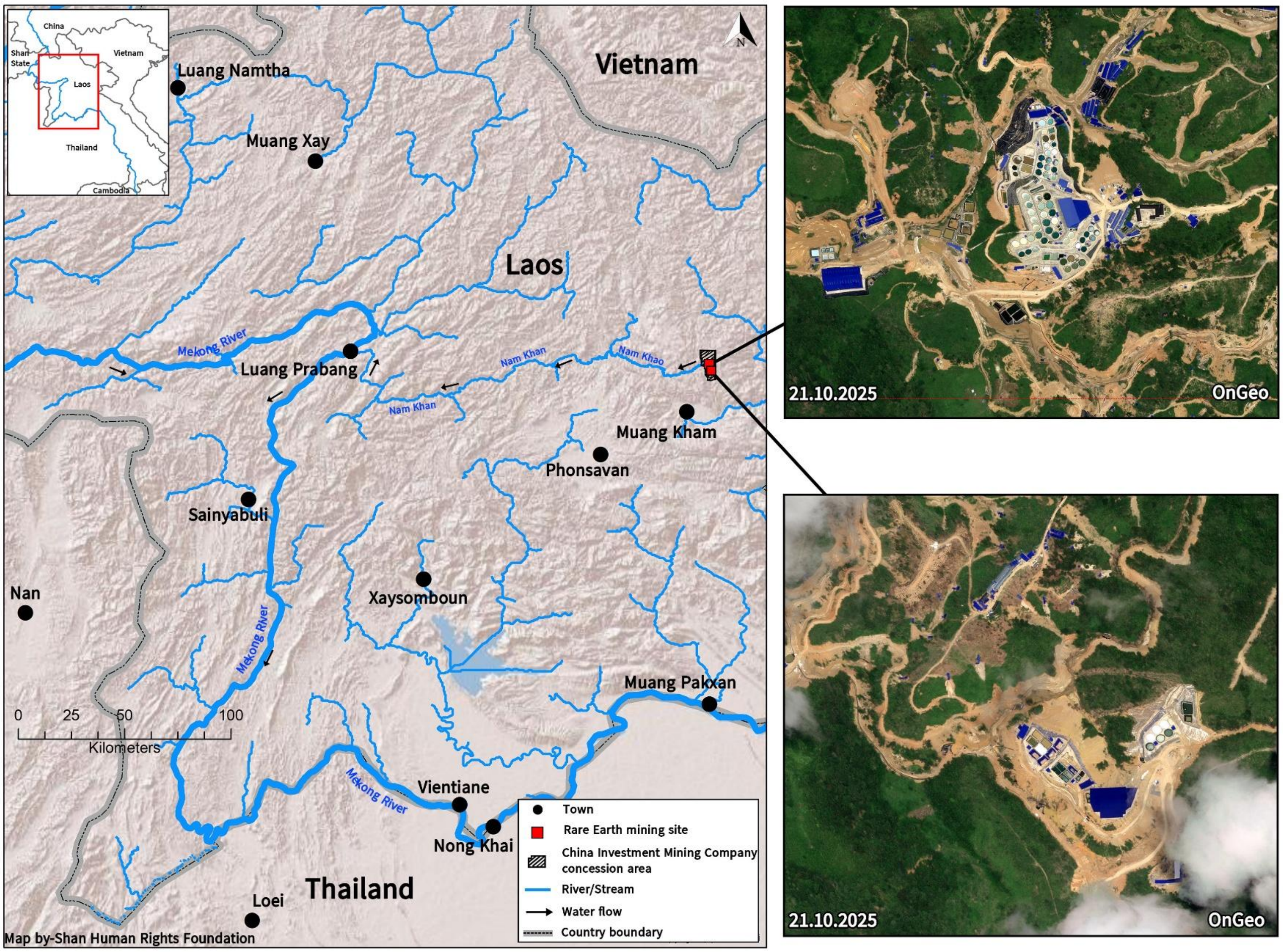
China Investment Mining Company is 90% owned by Shanghai Chijin Xiawu Metal Resources Co. Ltd., which is a joint venture formed in September 2022 to develop rare earth resources in Laos by China's state-backed Xiamen Tungsten Corporation and Chifeng Gold, the largest non-state owned gold producer in China. Xiamen Tungsten Corporation is one of China's major rare earth corporations.



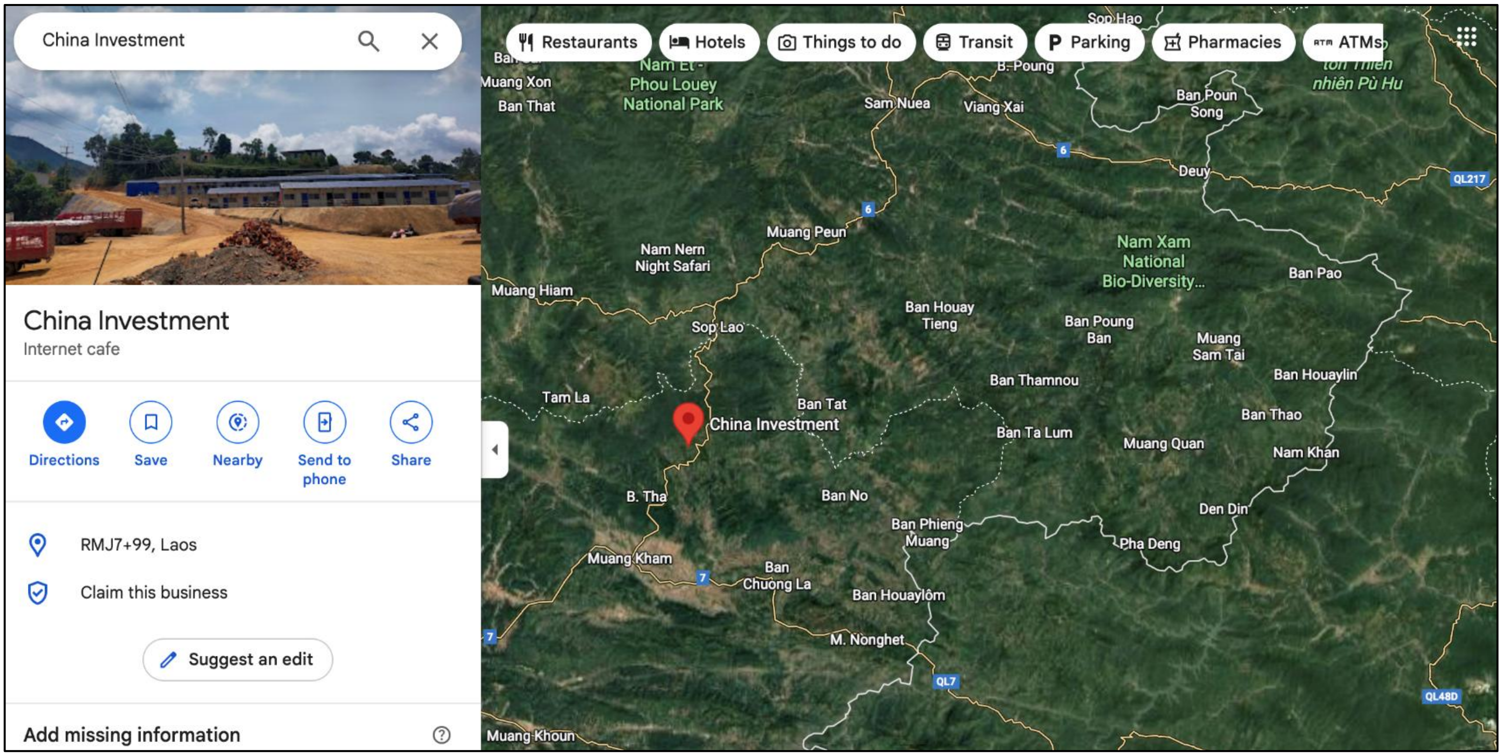
Map of rare earth mining concession areas granted to Chifeng Gold company in northern Laos (source)

Recent satellite images of China Investment Mining Company’s rare earth mines northeast of Muang Kham town (a.k.a. Mengkang) in Xiangkhuang province of northern Laos (in the southern orange-shaded concession area on Chifeng Gold’s map) already shows widespread environmental destruction, suggesting what is in store for the Kok river basin. The Muang Kham rare earth mines drain into the Nam Khao stream, then into the Nam Khan River, which joins the Mekong River at Luang Prabang.

Rare earth mines operated by China Investment Mining Company near Muang Kham in northern Laos



In April 2025, a peg labelled “China Investment” was visible on Google Earth locating the China Investment Mining Company rare earth mining area near Muang Kham, but this has since been removed.



Screenshot of Google Earth from April 2025

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