

Following eight years of legal battles in US State and Federal courts, Unocal has agreed to settle a case brought against it in 1996 on behalf of a group of 15 Burmese Villagers. The specific terms of the settlement has not been disclosed to the public, but the victory itself is believed by some to have sent a meaningful message to the villagers and others directly involved in the trial; Unocal is taking responsibility for its association with these events and international corporations may be held responsible for offenses in other countries in violation of international treaties.

The oil company was alleged to have built a natural gas pipeline in Burma (Myanmar) and allegedly enlisted, through a subsidiary company Yadana Investments, the Burmese military to provide security for the project. The pipeline passed through regions inhabited by Mon and Karen tribes and solicited these people as workers on the project. According to charges brought in the case, the military used their security detail to commit human rights abuses, including forced labor, relocation, rape, and murder. The charges against Unocal claimed that the corporation knew about or should have known about the Burmese military's track record in such assignments and therefore should be held responsible under the U.S. Alien Tort Claims Act of 1789. The settlement, agreed upon in a California state court suit apparently resolves a parallel action filed against Unocal in federal court.

Implications from the settlement may include may bolstering other Alien Tort Claims Act. Existing court cases include cases such as ones against Exxon Mobil Corp. in Indonesia; Fresh Del Monte Produce Inc. in Guatemala; and Unocal Corp. in Nigeria. (Since the settlement of Unocal case, Chevron Texaco has been bought out by Cheveron Texaco.)