

Environmental Group Urges Laos to Support Complaint Mechanism

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A large advertisement features investment fields by a Vietnamese rubber company in Vientiane in a file photo.

AFP

An environmental advocacy group has called on the government of Laos to ensure that a Vietnamese state-owned rubber group operating in the country is adhering to the law and upholding the rights of villagers affected by its plantations.

Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG), which is majority owned by the Vietnamese government, agreed in July to set up a system through which it resolves issues raised in citizen's complaints and inquiries concerning two of its plantations in Champasak and Savannakhet provinces within 30 days.

London-based environmental watchdog Global Witness said an initial investigation indicated that VRG had not yet implemented the complaint mechanism and called on Lao officials to ensure the company follows through on its pledge.

“It doesn't seem like at the moment that the Lao authorities have thrown their weight behind the mechanism, but that could just be because they don't know about

it or it could be because they have a problem with it,” Josie Cohen, land campaigner for Global Witness, told RFA’s Lao Service.

VRG agreed to establish the complaint mechanism following negotiations with Global Witness, which had found evidence that plantations run by the company’s subsidiaries in Laos and Cambodia were illegally confiscating and allocating land.

The group also cited evidence which suggested VRG had been engaging in illegal logging activities, and had failed to consult with villagers about its operations or offer them adequate compensation for their land.

Previously, VRG had no system in place that would allow affected communities to communicate their concerns over the company’s projects.

“Vietnam Rubber Group has told us that it genuinely wants to resolve the terrible impacts of its plantations and that it has created this mechanism to do so,” Cohen said.

“But as you know, the reality in Laos is that it’s very hard ... to go around the authorities at all. So now we need to look at ways to involve the authorities in this initiative, so at the very least they don’t block it, but in best case [scenario] they would support it and support groups to use it.”

No bearing on existing cases

A senior official at the Lao Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, who declined to be named, indicated that the government was aware of the mechanism, but said it would have no bearing on cases in which VRG had already taken over villagers’ land in Laos.

“I think it’s impossible that the villagers will be able to get their land back, and since the decision [to establish the mechanism] was made I have not seen any land conflict cases between villagers and VRG get resolved,” he said.

The official called VRG’s agreement to launch the mechanism indicative of its “high motivation to resolve the villagers’ problems,” but added that the strategy was part of a bid to “save face after ... grabbing land from the poor” in recent years.

Even with support from Lao authorities, the official said, it was “too late” to resolve past land issues.

“I accept that the government’s relevant sectors have not played a role as a bridge for both sides in seeking conflict resolution,” he said.

“[But] now it’s too late for VRG to accept complaints and feedback from those who

already lost land [according to past government decisions].”

Official inquiry

Cohen said Global Witness was unsure whether VRG had so far complied with the July agreement to implement the mechanism, as a company representative in the Lao capital Vientiane recently told the group he had never heard of the initiative.

She added that no one from her group had yet visited the offices of VRG’s two plantations in Champasak and Savannakhet provinces to check if local staff members were aware of the mechanism.

Global Witness expects that in coming weeks the first inquiry will be submitted to VRG’s national office in Vientiane, so the group will be able to see from an official inquiry how the company responds, Cohen said.

The group will then send representatives to visit VRG’s headquarters in Vietnam’s commercial capital Ho Chi Minh City every six months until July 2016 to assess how the mechanism is working and what the company needs to do to improve it, she said.

In the meantime, she said, Global Witness has already begun communicating with various other stakeholders in Laos about how to implement the mechanism.

She said that the group is also working to speak directly with officials in the capital, ensure that Hanoi holds talks with Vientiane about VRG’s activities, and bring government-affiliated organizations on board to help inform affected communities about the complaint channel.

Global Witness also wants to hold a multistate workshop in each province to bring district and provincial authorities together with company representatives and civil society groups to discuss the mechanism, Cohen said.

‘Rubber barons’

In September, Global Witness had criticized U.S.-based Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an international forest management group, for a decision to recertify VRG, which has been accused of grabbing land from villagers in Laos and Cambodia. The group had suspended the company in November 2013.

The FSC advocates responsible forest management around the world and assures consumers that products such as natural rubber come from plantations that adhere to certain social and environmental rules.

In a May 2013, Global Witness issued a report on “rubber barons” that pointed out that VRG had signed deals with the Lao and Cambodian governments to lease vast

tracts of land without getting permission from those who lived in the areas or compensating them for their land.

The group said this had “disastrous consequences for local communities and the environment.”

Impoverished families and indigenous peoples living in the areas faced food and water shortages as well as the loss of their burial grounds and sacred forests with little or no compensation, the report said.

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