

Lao Land Protest Villagers Held in Failing Health

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Two Yeub village residents arrested for cutting down rubber trees are shown in a file photo.

Fourteen villagers in Laos's Sekong province jailed since July for cutting down rubber trees on farm land claimed by a Vietnamese company are being held incommunicado, with some in failing health, sources say.

Speaking to RFA's Lao Service, a relative of one of those held said that the villagers

have been refused visits from their families since Oct. 2, when he was last able to see them.

Some of the jailed villagers may be suffering from illness or malnutrition, RFA's source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

“They appeared to have serious health problems,” the source said. “Their bodies were swollen, and they were being held in separate cells.”

Residents of Yeub village in Sekong's Thateng district have been fighting since 2006 for alternative land and additional compensation since the government granted their land to Vietnamese rubber company Cong Ty Cao Su Nghi Lao-Viet (LVF) in what is believed to have been a 50-year concession.

Much of Laos's economic growth is generated through land concessions for natural resources, including timber, agricultural products, minerals, and energy, even though these come at a cost for those who lose their land and may not receive proper compensation or adequate replacement farmland.

Land grabs and the appropriation of public property to turn over to foreign and domestic companies are commonplace in Laos, and villagers affected by them often refuse to speak out publicly because they fear retribution.

Sekong provincial officials including the governor, police chief, and prosecutor all declined comment in response to repeated calls from RFA reporters.

Loopholes to close

In an Oct. 23 speech to Laos's National Assembly, Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith said that loopholes in Lao land laws must be closed to ensure that the interests of the country's common people are not ignored as “individuals and business groups” scramble for wealth.

In particular, concessions must now be limited to single projects claiming no more than 100 hectares (247 acres) of land, Sisoulith said.

“Previously, provincial authorities wanting to approve a 1,000-hectare project would

split the concession into many smaller projects. We will no longer allow them to do this,” Sisoulith said.

Speaking to RFA on condition of anonymity, an analyst based in Laos said the government should examine the terms under which high-ranking officials in the country have acquired large holdings of land.

“State land and other properties have been given up because those officials have abused their power to take advantage [of the law].”

“This has resulted in huge losses,” he said.

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