

Lao Villagers Arrested in 11-Year-Old Land Dispute in Sekong Province

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Suvan (R) and Vikhan (L), residents of Yeub village in southeastern Laos' Sekong province, were arrested in June 2012 for submitting a petition against a Vietnamese rubber company. The men, who appear here in an October 2011 photo, are believed to be among a group of villagers arrested in July 2017 for cutting down rubber trees on the company's property.

A dozen residents of a village in southeastern Laos' Sekong province have been arrested for chopping down trees on land used by a Vietnamese rubber company, the latest development in the 11-year-old conflict over the terrain, a local police

officer and villager said.

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

“They have been arrested because they cut down rubber trees belonging to a Vietnamese rubber company on July 25 and they are now being detained at provincial security headquarters,” said the provincial policeman on condition of anonymity on Monday.

The police have not publicly released the names of those detained, he said.

The conflict over the land has been going on since 2006 because the company had “grabbed” 121 hectares (300 acres) from 55 families, though its concession from authorities legally allowed it to take only 42 hectares (104 acres), said a resident of Yeub village who declined to be named.

“Their land plots at the rubber plantation are being illegally occupied by Vietnamese LVF rubber company,” he said.

He went on to say that in March 2017, the office of Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith issued a notice directing Sekong province authorities to address the land dispute problem and assigned the ministries of natural resources and the environment, agriculture and forestry, and public security to take the lead in resolving it.

“But the notice did not specify the timing,” the villager said.

From 2011 to the present, villagers have been signing protest petitions against LVF and submitting them to the prime minister’s office and the National Assembly, he said.

“When provincial authorities were unable to resolve the problem, the villagers reoccupied their 121 hectares of lands on the rubber plantations, and they have not allowed the company to collect rubber since 2014 in hopes that they will be compensated with new land or a new resettlement plan,” he said.

Provincial authorities are now patrolling Yeub village to prevent residents from felling trees on the rubber plantation, and checking all outsiders who come and go in the village, he said.

RFA called Soraseumsack Phongsanouvong, Sekong province's vice attorney general, on Monday for information about the arrests in the ongoing land dispute, but he declined to comment.



The map shows Sekong province in southeastern Laos.

Credit: RFA graphic

Previous arrests

Much of Laos's economic growth is generated through land concessions for natural resources, including timber, agricultural products, minerals, and energy, even though they 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.

According to the villager, eight Yeub residents were arrested by provincial authorities for submitting a petition against LVF to the prime minister's office on May 1, 2012, because the provincial governor was not happy with their actions.

On May 25, the prime minister's office ordered Sekong's governor to rectify the situation, and authorities responded by arresting the villagers in June and July of that year, he said.

Eight of those arrested were named. They included men surnamed Sombath, Vikham, and Bounkhao, who were apprehended by Thateng district police on June 13. Men surnamed Somsawan, Bounsou, Bounpiey, and Phonsawai were taken in two days later, the villager said.

A man named Suvan who was arrested on July 26 was physically assaulted, given only eight meals during the 15 days he spent in jail, and was handcuffed, forcing him to urinate and defecate in place.

Authorities detained the others for almost two weeks, then released them, he said.

At the time, RFA reported that upon their release, authorities took into custody another man, a former soldier, who they said had organized the villagers to demand better compensation for their land and had helped them draft a petition sent to the central government, local sources said.

One of villagers who was arrested at the time told RFA prior to the new round of apprehensions that authorities told them to tell others they were merely being questioned.

“Before releasing us, police told us not to say we were arrested, but rather to say that the police had invited us for questioning,” he said.

Four-year suspension

Around the same time in June that most of the arrests took place, the Lao Ministry of Planning and Investment announced a four-year suspension on new land concessions for rubber plantations and new mining licenses because of concerns about land encroachment. Calls by the National Assembly for a countrywide review of land concessions followed.

Four months later, the Lao government set up a task force to investigate the long-running dispute in Yeub, which villagers at the time said was in response to online conversations sparked by international media reports of the detentions.

In February 2013, an official from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry told RFA that authorities in Laos had granted a parcel of 100 hectares (247 acres) of farmland to a group of Yeub villagers who demanded compensation for an area they said the government grabbed for the rubber plantation.

“We believe that helping Yeub village at present is the right thing to do,” said the official on condition of anonymity. “We have cleared the rice fields for them and provided them with a livestock program and a water pump.”

But he also said some residents remained unhappy with the settlement and claimed that the new parcel was not as fertile as the original one, even though the amount of land granted to the village was equal to the amount they had lost in the concession.

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