

Villagers squeezed out of homes as forest fight heats up

A large piece of pristine national park and coastline has been handed to developers by Hun Sen's government, with locals forced out of the way

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War widow Saen Saheng was at home with her grandchildren when 30 security guards entered her village of Prek Smach brandishing axes, sling-shots and electric cattle prods. She had lived in the village since she was a young woman.

"The company didn't come and say anything, they just came and broke down my home. They brought security guards and took it apart, two days ago," she said. "They were even carrying axes and hammers with them. They brought the axes really close to my face."

Sixteen families were taking refuge in the local temple at the time, having fled a neighbouring village a month earlier when security guards torched their homes.

When the villagers rallied the guards backed off, but then called in trucks which blocked the village road by dumping piles of rock and earth.

The clashes in Prek Smach village are only one example of the land grabs happening all over Cambodia, but in this case the consequences could be dire because of the location.

In 1998 the Cambodian government started selling off parts of Botum Sakor's 171,250 hectares, which had been a National Park established under royal decree since 1993. These Economic Land Concessions (ELC), awarded to the highest bidder, have placed huge swathes of the park, amounting to 70%, in the hands of private developers for agribusiness, such as palm oil and rubber plantations, for tourism and infrastructure.

One of the most controversial of these projects is a luxury Chinese tourism venture called the Dara Sakor Seashore Resort, as well as a Chinese port being built nearby.

The villagers said they hold district governor Khem Chandy responsible for organising the ongoing harassment. They have accused him of being on the payroll of the resort's developers, the Tianjin Union Development Group, or UDG.

Villagers started blockading the area, felling trees and carrying rocks to block access to a new road built on the orders of the governor. One villager said the road led to the governor's private pier, from where he took a boat to his island house. By blocking access the villagers were also hitting him where it hurt — they stopped the income he was making from parking and docking fees.

'Nothing will grow': Sok Lim toils with a hoe to clear the course grasses that cover her small plot, one of dozens strung along the dusty road in Phny Meas village.

The governor soon arrived in a shiny four-wheel-drive and unloaded a large chainsaw, with the help of local police, to cut away the trees blocking the road. When Spectrum asked the governor if he had ordered the security guards to raze the villagers' houses, he said: "The minister of environment, as the chair of that committee, is in charge of solving the problem, not me."

Khem Chandy then refused to answer any more questions.

One villager who had helped set up the barricades to try to keep the developers out explained why she had resorted to such extreme measures. Her first house had been demolished, as was the one she was relocated to.

"I had a house, but four years ago the company came with axes and destroyed it," said Chum Ohn. "They gave me a new house 10km away, but now that is broken too. I received no land and no well for water."

With life at the relocation site of Ta Noun commune proving impossible, Chum Ohn decided to return: "I received no money, nothing, so we just returned to the coast for fishing. I built a hut close to the sea, but the company came to destroy my hut too."

More than 1,000 families have been ordered inland to till sandy soil on land carved out of the tropical forests of the national park, which is still home to a plethora of flora and fauna.

In 2009, a four-year study of the park's animal life by NGO Frontier Cambodia confirmed it as a global biodiversity hotspot containing 49 rare mammal species including the Asian elephant, leopard and gibbon.

Their inventory also included 69 reptiles, 147 butterflies and 196 bird species.

Residents of Prek Smach commune, Kiri Sakor district guard their village from threats by the Union Development Company at a road block they have constructed. Botum Sakor national park, Koh Kon Province, Cambodia.

A HIGH STAKES GAME

A four-lane 68km highway built by UDG developers — a Chinese property conglomerate — slices through the middle of the national park to access a 36,000 hectare coastal ELC awarded by the government in 2009. Along the highway, swathes of forest have been bulldozed and used for building materials.

A big draw there will be gambling, on a high-stakes level that will dwarf similar developments in the region. The centrepiece of the US\$3.8 billion (123.8 billion baht) luxury coastal resort will be a casino, surrounded by golf courses and its own airport. The company's website claims its concession covers 20% of Cambodia's coastline.

The website says it "will become a new tropical beach paradise for rich Chinese". It also claims the project will house the permanent convention centre of Asean. The Asean Secretariat in Jakarta claims to know nothing about this, and a spokesperson said: "Asean National Tourism Organisations are not involved in this undertaking."

The website says it will also include a "tropical farm, fishing village and ancient town". UDG declined to confirm whether this tropical farm, fishing village or ancient town would be based on existing places established by local people, or they would be new purpose-built attractions. With local farms and fishing villages now being razed, the evidence suggests the latter.

Tourism development is only a small part of a vast Chinese game of regional expansion now being played out. In December 2012, Chinese-owned Cambodia Iron & Steel Mining Industry Group (Cismig) and the China Railway Group Limited agreed on a \$11.2 billion investment to build a new 405km railway connecting a new iron and steel processing plant in the northern Cambodian province of Preah Vihear to the new port at Botum Sakor near Sihanoukville on the coast.

The route of the railway, set to transport at least one million tonnes of iron and steel every year, remains shrouded in secrecy, perhaps to avoid further land conflicts.

However, it has become increasingly apparent that the rail route will pass through the national park before arriving at the new port via a bridge to an offshore island, probably Koh Smach. When Spectrum visited the site of the port, a deafening blast in a quarry shook the ground as a nearby hillside collapsed in clouds of dust. Rocks were soon being loaded and transported away to make the foundations for wharves, dams, reservoirs and artificial islands, transforming the area beyond recognition.

Port developer China Ocean Engineering Construction General Bureau said on its website: "The construction plan includes three private wharves, one private general cargo terminal and auxiliary facilities ... The gross investment is more than one billion dollars."

With docking capacity for 10,000-tonne ships, the port will have a total annual capacity of 50 million tonnes. In a report by NGO groups Equitable Cambodia and Focus on the Global South, they speculate that the large spare port capacity could be filled with mineral ore from other deposits in northern provinces yet to be exploited. Developers may also have their eyes on agricultural commodities produced by the many ELCs along the rail route.

Port in a storm: Above and below right, shipping wharfs are under construction at the Dara Sakor development in Botum Sakor National Park, Koh Kong province.

CHALLENGING RELOCATION

Sok Lim was toiling with her hoe, clearing the grass that covered her small plot of land next to one of dozens of houses strung along a dusty road that make up Phny Meas village, one of three relocation sites in the area. The silvery soil underneath her hoe is nearly all sand. "Nothing much will grow here," she said.

The new houses and land plots lining the dusty road were constructed in a hurry by UDG on land carved out of the thick forest which still towers in the background.

Originally from the coast, Sok Lim is not used to farming like this and misses her once self-sufficient lifestyle of fishing and rice farming. Like her neighbours, she is bitter that the grandiose promises of compensation made by the company failed to materialise. She said she was promised \$8,000 per hectare for her farmland, but received nothing — a common complaint in the area.

Her neighbour, Vuthy, said he had almost given up trying to farm as he didn't find it worthwhile under the conditions: "I planted some fruit trees but they are not growing. It's because of the soil — it has no nutrients as it sits on a hill. So when we plant we don't get much out of it."

To make ends meet he has taken to foraging in the forest. "It is not just me going into the forest, as all the villagers are poor. Those who came to the relocation site have nothing, so we have to enter the forest and look for things such as rattan and fruit."

Defensive action: From left to right, residents of Prek Smach commune construct a road blockade to guard their village from threats by the Union Development Company, which has destroyed nearby homes.

He is acutely aware of the impact he and his neighbours are having on the forest, but feels helpless.

"We're all poor," he said. "We'll all go to look for things to sell each year, so there is nothing left the year after. Hence the decline."

In response to increasing conflicts arising from the handing out of ELCs, in 2012 Prime Minister Hun Sen ordered a halt to any new land concessions and encouraged enforcement of what he called a "leopard skin" policy — declaring that villagers may stay in their homes even when they are in the middle of an ELC, "like the spots of a leopard".

Since Hun Sen's policy was implemented, critics have questioned if it works in practice. Nevertheless it does afford villagers, at least on paper, the right to remain in their homes.

The problem in Botum Sakor is all too common in Cambodia, and all the signs are that vested interests have ignored laws with impunity. Implementation of the 2001 Land Law, which limits the size of ELCs to 10,000 hectares, also seems to be ignored, with most of the companies' concessions in the Botum Sakor region exceeding that limit by a long way. Hun Sen's halt on ELCs was short-lived with Cambodian rights group Adhoc claiming 33 ELCs had been handed out since the prime minister announced the ban.

Shipping wharfs being constructed at the DARA Sakor development in the Botum Sakor National Park, Koh Kong Province, Cambodia.

FOREST ON FIRE

In one concession awarded to the Ly Yong Phat Group, the company owned by controversial senator and business tycoon Ly Yong Phat, the tropical forest can be seen on fire in the distance, reportedly to clear land for a tapioca plantation. The senator, known locally as "The King of Koh Kong", had been reported on previously in Spectrum for his role in what became known as the "blood sugar" controversy, which involved using child labour on his sugar cane plantations.

NGO Global Forest Watch's satellite data highlighted the locations of the forest fires and showed a huge area in the heart of the park had been cleared since 2012, and the clearing was spreading rapidly.

On the way to investigate the fires, Spectrum was stopped at a roadblock leading into the forest by men in military fatigues. They said the land belonged to a company and we could not pass, but they declined to elaborate. According to Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson, director of Cambodian campaign group Mother Nature, "that roadblock is illegal, placed on national park land, restricting a road to the park which is the heritage of all Cambodians".

FISH STOCKS HIT BY SAND MINING

Much of the shoreline around Botum Sakor is lined with mangrove forest, which Mr Gonzalez-Davidson said made up one of the most important remaining mangrove habitats in Southeast Asia. He said the mangroves acted as a fish spawning ground, supplying stocks to fisheries all the way down to the Gulf of Thailand. His organisation Mother Nature recently started a campaign to stop the prolific sand-mining in the area.

The same Ly Yong Phat Group involved in deforesting the national park also runs the dredging operations which involve huge exports of sand to Singapore for land reclamation.

A 2012 report by the IUCN said: "Sand mining has caused a reduction in fish catches by 70-90% and the displacement of many families as shorelines have retreated by 100 metres."

SETTLERS BURIED OUT

As the boat navigated the twists and turns further into the interior of the national park, the channel narrowed and eventually we reached a small landing. From there it was a 3km walk to the village of Phum Thmey. Along the way we noticed that much of the forest had been cleared, some to make way for Acacia plantations.

The villagers explained how they came there more than 10 years ago to farm rice. Some were ethnic Cham Muslims originally from eastern Cambodia. All were dismayed by the ongoing struggle they have had to endure to hang on to farmland they claim as their own since a 60,200 hectare ELC was handed out to the Chinese firm Green Rich/Elite Group in 1998 for palm oil and acacia plantations.

Since then this company owned by controversial plantation giant Asian Pulp and Paper has been extending its Acacia plantations onto their land, with support from local authorities.

A villager named Choey showed his wad of legal documents and explained how he had been battling to keep his farmland since 2006, even spending time in jail. He said the government viewed the settlers as no more than squatters who settled in a national park, which was off limits.

The settlers viewed matters differently. Saw Phia, an ethnic Cham, explained: "They told us this was the company's land and the villagers had stolen their land. To which we replied that it couldn't be the company's land as when we got here it had no owner and it was forest."

Many villagers were infuriated after the company paid pitifully low wages to the local community to plant an Acacia plantation, then burned their houses.

The recently released Human Rights Watch, World Report 2015, highlighted the fact that land disputes in Cambodia were now running out of control. "The number of people affected by state-involved land conflicts since 2000 passed the half-million mark in March 2014." n

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