Villagers who paid thousands of dollars for plots of land in Kompong Speu province last year said they were told this month that they could not plant crops on their fallow land.

Locals said about two weeks ago, soldiers began clearing parts of land in Phnom Srouch district and forbade them from planting on their own property.

Unbeknownst to the villagers, Cambodia Golden Land Development Co., Ltd. signed a contract March 4 with the Ministry of Agriculture to lease 4,900 hectares of land in the district for 70 years to run an agro-industrial plantation. But, more than 150 families own 1,600 hectares within the concession, locals said.

“I don’t know anything about the company or what they are doing. They just came and bulldozed,” said a military policeman who showed receipts for 111 hectares of land, bought last year for his and six other families for $11,162.

He said that when he and other villagers started planting crops as the rainy season began earlier this month, soldiers came and ordered them to stop.

Two days later, half a dozen soldiers set up camp across the street, he said Friday.

He and other landowners interviewed at their homes and by telephone asked to remain anonymous, fearing retribution for speaking out.

The Landowners said officials and soldiers would not reveal the name of the company that claimed control of their land. They had never met with company officials and were given no information about what the company might plant. The only information villagers had was that the land they were using to grow crops would not be confiscated, and the land they owned but had not planted would be seized by the company.

Kompong Speu Governor Ou Bun, said he had received reports of the land conflict, but that he had not yet convened a meeting with provincial, district and commune authorities to investigate. He declined to comment further.

Thun Saray, president of the human rights NGO Adhoc, said Adhoc was investigating the case, and would try to help the villagers, who had filed a complaint on behalf of 152 families.

He said Tuesday that the secrecy surrounding the Golden Land concession was typical.

“When [government officials] pass the concession, they don’t talk with the people. They don’t let people know what is the effect for them,” Thun Saray said.

Such secrecy is illegal, however. Before beginning to develop a concession, a company must create a master plan, perform an environmental impact assessment, which must be released to the public, and resolve disputes with landowners, said Kith Seng, director of the Planning, Statistics and Internal Cooperation Department of the Ministry of Agriculture.

He said Tuesday that Golden Land had not started construction because they had not satisfied those requirements.

At the site on Friday, however, soldiers under RCAF’s Development Directorate said they started work at the end of June. A group of about one dozen soldiers had bulldozed some 6 hectares of land, the chief of security for the operation said. His soldiers would continue work until their commander told them to return, he said. A Golden Land spokeswoman contacted Wednesday denied conflicts between the company and landowners.

“Some villagers just occupied the land after the state rented it out to the company,” she said. She added that the company will allow residents to keep their crops or try to buy it from them at the appropriate price. She would not provide details about what Golden Land plans grow, though she said it will include fast-growing trees intended for export, and some eucalyptus.

Details about what the company will plant are important to villagers, even if they keep their farms.

Commercial plantations of eucalyptus and other trees often used for pulp have been found in scientific studies to dry out the land, taking needed water and nutrients from nearby crops.

For now, the families said they are trying to get information wherever they can, and have begun filing complaints with officials and human rights organizations in the hope that they can keep their farms.

The chief of security at the concession site said the problems with locals were “normal problems.”

“[Villagers] say the company comes to take their land,” the security chief said. “They complain that the company comes and surrounds their land.”

But villagers wondered why their farms were suddenly in jeopardy.

“I just want to have my family dwelling and farm in my free time,” one landowner said. “How can they do this?”