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## Siem Reap Land Dispute Leads to Detentions

BY RANN REUY | FEBRUARY 13, 2009

A dispute over nearly 7,000 hectares of land in Siem Reap province's Varin district led local villagers to briefly detain four workers who were helping clear the land, officials and village representatives said Thursday.

Phoeun Tha, a resident of Wat village—one of four villages in Srenoy commune affected by the dispute—said the villagers, despite wielding axes and knives at the scene, intended no harm toward the workers. He said they detained the owner of the bulldozers and other machines used by the workers.

"We just stopped them and required their thumbprints before releasing them and asked them to not come to clear villagers' land again," he said.

Villagers say the dispute began three to four years ago, when district and commune authorities sold the land to private firm Banya Group, which they say is trying to force them from the land without adequate compensation. Phoeun Tha said the company offered residents \$200 per hectare when it tried to buy about 3,500 hectares in 2005 or 2006, but only a few villagers took the offer.

"People are getting nothing from the company or authorities in exchange for leaving the land," Phoeun Tha said. "People never sold this land to the company."

Ham Mang, another Wat villager, said Banya Group is now not offering the residents any compensation, adding that villagers are demanding \$800 per hectare to leave the land.

Contact information for Ban-ya Group could not be found

Thursday.

Varin District Governor Em Vatt said by telephone Thursday that officials were meeting that evening with provincial authorities, trying to find a resolution.

"Now, we are meeting to discuss the dispute with the provincial authorities," Em Vatt said before adding he was too busy to discuss the conflict further. The district officials were still meeting with provincial authorities late Thursday evening.

Sar Vannra, provincial investigator for the rights group Licadho, said a complaint regarding the dispute had been filed with his office Wednesday.

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