Land clearance by Korean firm blocked

SOME 800 people in Kampong Thom province’s Santuk district staged a protest against a Korean rubber company yesterday, claiming that the firm is trying to clear their trees and farmland without offering any compensation.

Villagers demanded that the company, Korean BNA (Cam) Corp, stop the clearing of cashew trees they claim to have been planting since 1984.

Red spray paint reportedly marked the trees on the land facing destruction, but protesters from six villages in Santuk’s Tipor commune stood their ground to prevent the clearing of the land.

The protest was peaceful, according to Pen Chhin, a representative for the villagers, who said protesters simply stood in the middle of the orchard to prevent the destruction of the trees.

“If they are going to clear our cashew trees, how can we survive?” Pen Chhin said yesterday, claiming that roughly 400 families depend on the orchard.

Korean BNA (Cam) Corp received a 7,500-hectare land concession from the Cambodian government in September 2009 as part of a project aimed at developing rubber and cassava crops. The lease for the property was set at 70 years.

“The company officials told us they will not provide any compensation because that land is from the government,” Pen Chhin said.

He added that villagers have filed a complaint to various government departments and have asked the provincial governor to intervene and find a resolution for them before the clearance of the land.

“If the company gets 7,500 hectares of land to develop in this area, where will we live and where will we farm?” said Chan Sea, a villager involved in the protest.

He added that company representatives had arrived just one day prior to the protest, spray-painting red marks on the trees to signal that they would be cut down.

Santuk district governor Pich Sophea said a provincial committee has asked the company to halt its development for the time being to allow for an assessment of its impact.

“We have to look carefully at how the families are affected and then we can find a resolution,” he said yesterday.

Nhem Sarat, provincial coordinator for local rights group Adhoc, said he had written a letter to the provincial governor asking him to stop the clearing of the land until a settlement is reached.

Bak Byung-kun, head of BNA (Cam) Corp, could not be reached for comment.
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