

**Press Release**

**Five Shooting Incidents at Land Dispute Protests in the Past Two Months Show Alarming Increase in Use of Lethal Force**

Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)

January 26, 2012 - Cambodia's land-grabbing crisis has taken a disturbingly violent turn in the last two months, with at least five incidents involving armed forces opening fire during protests. A total of 19 residents were injured at the protests, including seven from gunfire.



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Each of the incidents has been documented in video footage or photographs, but the perpetrators have to this day uniformly escaped punishment, exemplifying Cambodia's notorious system of impunity.

"These recent incidents are symptoms of an accelerating breakdown in Cambodian society," said LICADHO President Pung Chhiv Kek. "At the moment, it is largely the rural poor who are feeling the brunt. But land grabbing can only be pushed so far before it consumes the society as a whole. This is bad not only for ordinary Cambodians, but also for investors and others who are ostensibly benefiting from land redistribution."

"It is time to address the root causes of this breakdown. That means ensuring equity, transparency and fairness in land rights."

The five shootings are as follows:

- 1) On November 24, 2011, military police officers, accompanied by civilian police, repeatedly shot into the air to break a road block staged by about 100 villagers in Treng Trayueng commune, Phnom Sruoch District, Kampong Speu Province. The villagers were protesting an attempt by the provincial prosecutor to implement a Supreme Court verdict ordering the seizure of certain farmland. The land subject to the order was awarded to an obscure "farmers" association, represented by a military colonel. The land that the local authorities insisted on clearing on the day in question, however, was not the same land specified in the order. No one was injured in the shooting.
- 2) On December 12, 2011, a commanding military officer from Battambang's Phnom Preuk district shot at a group of villagers, injuring three. The villagers had been demonstrating against the clearing of farmland by Soun Mean Sambath company, which was granted a 4,095 hectare Economic Land Concession (ELC) in the area in April 2011, resulting in the ongoing land conflict with villagers. The military officer was acting as a security guard for the company.
- 3) On January 3, 2012, over 100 mixed police forces oversaw the demolition of inhabited houses in Borei Keila. The demolition and forced eviction was carried out by Phan Imex employees and paid workers, alongside an excavator. Traumatized residents were unable to even clear out their belongings before the destruction began. Eight community representatives were arrested while protesting the forced eviction, including one minor. Police also fired tear gas and live ammunition at the residents. At least 12 people were injured including one policeman, some seriously. (Video available at <http://licadho-cambodia.org/video.php?perm=28>)
- 4) Also on January 3, 2012, a long-standing land dispute involving indigenous villagers living in Ratanakiri's Ka Nat Thum village and the Vietnamese Heng Brother Rubber Company resulted in gunfire. On the day the incident took place, the company was clearing land, which led to villagers mobilizing to halt the activity. Local authorities came to the area and announced the company would suspend land clearing. Villagers then walked back towards their village. On their way, the group passed by a military police officer acting as guard for the company. The officer thought the group was staging a protest and fired his weapon at the ground near the villagers twice. The villagers reported the incident to the Andong Meas district governor, but were told that officials were too busy preparing for the 7th January ceremony. Heng Brother was granted an ELC covering 2,361 hectares of land in 2007.
- 5) On January 18, 2012, in a widely reported incident resulting in serious injuries, military personnel acting as security guards for the TTY company opened fire on protestors in Kratie's Snuol district. This case also relates to an ELC that TTY obtained in the Snuol Wildlife Sanctuary. The shooting, which left four villagers injured, took place when villagers tried to stop the bulldozers from destroying their cassava fields. (Video: <http://licadho-cambodia.org/video.php?perm=29>)

The five shootings vividly demonstrate the potential for serious unrest and deadly violence created by land grabbing. Authorities, meanwhile, continue to ignore the problem, claiming that economic land concessions are not a source of social conflict or that forced evictions are simply not taking place in Cambodia.

"The blatant theft and selling off of Cambodians' land cannot continue for much longer," said LICADHO

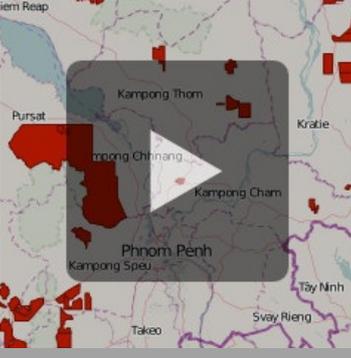
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Director Naly Pilorge. "The accelerating frequency in the use of lethal force is not only terrifying for Cambodian citizens, but should also make donors and scrupulous investors who are crucial for fair and sustainable development re-think their engagement with Cambodia and seek tangible changes."

A common thread running through the five shooting incidents is the existence of improperly awarded land in areas populated by long-term inhabitants. The government has significantly accelerated the pace at which it has been granting such concessions, most frequently labeled ELCs.

In Phnom Penh and the 12 provinces in which LICADHO works - roughly half the country - over 400,000 people have been affected by land-grabbing and evictions since 2003. In 2011, nearly 11,000 additional Cambodian families were newly affected by land conflicts. The international community has previously called for a moratorium on evictions, yet the pace of the displacements has not decreased.

LICADHO once again calls for a moratorium on forced evictions. LICADHO also maintains that there must be a freeze on ELCs, and existing controversial ELCs must be re-evaluated for compliance with the Sub Decree on Economic Land Concessions, which requires, among other things, public consultations with all affected individuals prior to the award of an ELC.

Those responsible for firing on civilians must be arrested and prosecuted to the full extent of the law, as must any commanding officers or supervisors who can be held criminally liable under the law for granting permission or for negligence. Finally, as LICADHO has urged multiple times, the government and private companies must stop the misuse of state armed forces by private interests.

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