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Call for five land concession contracts to be abolished

Fri, 29 June 2007 [Cheang Sokha](#)

In a June 19 speech delivered at the Cambodian Development Cooperation Forum (CDCF),

Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries(MAFF) Chan Sarun announced that the

government has decided to cancel land concession contracts to five companies and

several others were advised to reform their activities.

"The MAFF plans to end negotiations with the five companies in 2007," Sarun

said in a statement.

The move came as donor countries criticized the government for land disputes issues

at the CDCF, but opposition lawmakers and civil society activists are calling for

land concessions to be abolished claiming they have a negative impact on the livelihoods

of the rural poor.

Yim Sovann, chairman of the investigation and anti-corruption commission at the National

Assembly, said some companies do not produce agriculture after receiving licenses

from the government, but instead use the awarded land for logging or transfer the

land to another company for development.

"In my opinion, the government should stop providing land concession,"

Sovann said. "I am very concerned that most of the land is occupied by groups

of people and they do not use the land for the interest of the poor."

Sovann said the government doesn't reap much benefit from land concessions, and it's

better to keep the land for an increasing rural population that may otherwise flock

to cities to search for jobs.

"You can see that most of the land disputes occurred on the concession land,"

he said.

On August 2, 2006, the MAFF signed a 90-year lease of 9,700 hectares in Sre Ambel

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to the Koh Kong Sugar Industry Company and 9,400 hectares in Botum Sakor district

to the Koh Kong Plantation Company. Both companies belonged to Cambodian People's

Party senator and casino tycoon Oknha Ly Yong Phat.

Locals claim that 5,000 hectares of the concession was occupied by people engaged

in rotating slash-and-burn agriculture. Kek Galabru, president of local human rights

NGO Licadho, said the government provided the land concession because the company

planned to develop the local economy and provide jobs, but in reality it has exacerbated

the suffering of local people.

Galabru said the dispute between villagers in Sre Ambel and Yong Phat still continues

without resolution and the company has been bulldozing the villagers' land.

"We do not oppose the development," Galabru said. "But we have to look to whether the people benefit from the development or if it's just for a small

group of rich people while the poor become poorer."

Galabru said the government should study the potential impacts before providing land

for investment. Local people should be called in for discussion, she said. The government

never informs people that their land is being conceded and people are shocked when

firms arrive to bulldoze their land.

"We have the law but the government itself and the companies never enforce it,"

she said. "It is abuse of power."

The government, at least in part, has made overtures to address the issue. Some companies,

which have invested in economic land concessions will face suspension or cancellation

of contracts, an official at MAFF said.

Speaking on the condition of anonymity, the official said that a MAFF investigation

completed in early June found that some companies were inactive or were conducting

improper activities on land concessions. He said the government is considering suspending

their contracts.

"MAFF is still continuing to investigate their activities," the official said. "Some companies were called to correct their activities."

On June 8, Chan Sarun wrote a letter to the directors of the Vietnamese companies

Tay Nam, located in Kratie province, and Tay Nam BPM located in Monduliri province,

to temporarily stop their activities on a land concession because MAFF found negative

conditions and serious implementation violations in both sites.

MAFF granted for 70-year licenses to Tay Nam and Tay Nam BPM in

July 2006, to invest

in plantations of cassava, rubber, cashew and the construction of a processing factory.

According to the report from MAFF, since 1992 until February 2007, the government

has granted economic land concessions at 97 different locations to 96 companies in

16 provinces. Of these, 39 were foreign companies. But due to inactivity and contract

violations between 2000 and 2006, 30 companies-which acquired a total of 265,230

hectares of land-have had their contracts canceled. There are presently 57 "active"

companies covering 943,069 hectares of Cambodian land-another 66 companies have not

yet signed contracts.

A high-ranking official at MAFF, who led a delegation to investigate the companies

in the northeastern provinces, said the government should not put too much pressure

on the companies because there have many factors which have led to inactivity and

delays . He cited, among other factors, problems with not importing machinery and

protests by villagers who claim the land belongs to them.

"The demarcation of the land is the responsibility of the MAFF, but they never

do it," the official said. "They're always speaking about the rich and powerful people grabbing the land, but they never ever speak about the local people

who grab company land."



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