

## Economic land concessions in Prey Lang rejected

 Mon, 6 August 2012 [David Boyle](#) and [May Titthara](#)


Deforestation is a growing problem in Cambodia. Photograph: May Titthara/Phnom Penh Post

In a rare victory for those battling to preserve Prey Lang forest, the government has cancelled four economic land concessions in the area totalling more than 40,000 hectares that threatened pristine ecosystems.

Another 3,200 hectare ELC in Koh Kong province has also been cancelled, while two more in Kratie province and one in

Monduliri province totalling 30,000 hectares have been restricted, according to an unofficial translation of a letter from the Council of Ministers to relevant ministries obtained by the Post.

The letter dated July 2 declares that four ELCs totalling 40,618 hectares have been cancelled in Kampong Thom's Sandan district because they are located in the middle of evergreen and semi-evergreen forest inside "the largest low-land [contiguous evergreen] forest in Southeast Asia" – Prey Lang.

"With the principle of tiger-skin development formula of Samdech Techo Prime Minister [Hun Sen] and the standard contract of ELCs, this area cannot be polished," the letter states, referring to a principle only to allow concessions in already degraded areas.

Aphiwat Kaosou Co Ltd, Aphiwat Kaosou (I) Co Ltd, Aphiwat Kaosou (II) Co Ltd and PVP International Trading had all lost their ELCs in Prey Lang, which had been granted, though the firms had yet to sign a contract with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

Contact details for all four firms, which were all planning to develop rubber plantations, could not be found yesterday.

Translated, the first three of those names simply means "develop rubber" one, two and three, perhaps suggesting these companies are merely subsidiaries of a larger firm.

The establishment of subsidiary companies by a single firm is a tactic that multiple companies in Cambodia have employed to skirt the 10,000-hectare limit in the [2001 Land Law](#) placed on ELCs.

Deforestation of the roughly 360,000 hectare greater Prey Lang forest by development companies granted ELCs has sparked staunch resistance from some of the estimated 350,000 residents in the greater Prey Lang area.

The majority of these residents are from the Kuy ethnic minority who live traditionally and rely on non-timber products from Prey Lang, which straddles Thom, Stung Treng, Kratie and Preah Vihear provinces.

Suwanna Gauntlett, CEO of conservation group [Wildlife Alliance](#), said

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the four proposed Prey Lang ELCs had been “extremely alarming” because they were in the core of the forest.

“I could safely say that half of that is primary growth, probably more, so that is why these four concessions were particularly alarming,” she said.

The cancellation of those ELCs and one in Koh Kong, which had threatened the last corridor linking the two bodies of forest in the Cardamom Mountains, showed government commitment to protect the environment, she said.

“We’re absolutely thrilled that the government decided to cancel it altogether.”

Bun Uy, a secretary of state at the Council of Ministers who signed the letter, stressed the CoM had not itself cancelled the ELCs but merely informed the parties involved of what had happened.

“[Prime Minister Hun Sen] had already cancelled some of the companies’ [ELCs] in some provinces ... and the prime minister will keep the land that was withdrawn from the company to provide to the families that have no land,” he said.

Besides threatening the rich and unique wildlife of Prey Lang including dozens of endangered animals, conservationists have warned logging will destroy a vital watershed feeding the Mekong River system.

The logging led the Prey Lang community to stage an elaborate protest in May last year where about 200 villagers, many adorned with floral face paint dressed up as so-called avatars, converged on Phnom Penh to protest against ELCs.

Hoeun Sopheap, a representative of the Prey Lang Network, welcomed the cancellations but said other firms with ELCs were still rampantly logging.

“We, living in Sandan district surrounding Prey Lang will do a big thank-you ceremony for the government if the government cancels CRCK, Try Pheap, An Mady Group Co Ltd and Teng Saravuth’s ELCs,” Sopheap said.

If the government did this, villagers would stop their demonstrations, which have been some of the most coordinated and publicised acts of protest against land concessions in Cambodia.

The boundaries of Prey Lang are still a matter of conjecture and it is not clear that all the ELCs belonging to firms or individuals mentioned by Sopheap are actually inside the forest.

Mathieu Pellerin, a consultant with rights group [Licadho](#), said that though it was good the ELCs that had yet to be fully established had been cancelled, active concessions still being used to clear forest needed to be stopped urgently.

“So I think the big picture is that there is this apparent attempt to stop harm but there is ongoing harm on through other concessions, specifically CRCK,” he said.

CRCK, a Vietnamese firm, was granted a 70-year lease on a 6,044 hectare ELC in Prey Lang in 2009 and has been locked in an ongoing battle with Prey Lang villages who accuse it of flagrant illegal logging.

A 615,306-hectare Prey Lang protected forest and biodiversity conservation area has been proposed in a 2011 draft government sub-decree has yet to be adopted by the parliament and which officials have since said has been revised down in size by about 20 per cent.

The July 2 letter also confirms Indochina Gateway Capital’s 3,200-hectare ELC in Koh Kong province’s Sre Ambel district for a banana plantation has been cancelled, primarily because 63 per cent of the area is evergreen or semi-evergreen forest.

“Currently, there are 40 families living inside this ELC and about 100 h.a. of paddy rice fields inside this area,” it states.

“This area is also important for protection of biodiversity, watershed

management, elephant corridor for passing and potential for ecotourism.”

Eastern Rubber (Cambodia) Co Ltd, Binh Phuok Kratie Rubber 1 Company Limited and Binh Phuok Kratie Rubber 2 Company Limited will be restricted in how they develop 10,000-hectare ECLs, two in Kratie province’s Snuol district and the third in Modulkiri’s Seima district respectively.

The firms are forbidden from clearing 85 per cent of their ELCs that has been deemed evergreen or semi-evergreen forest.

Contact details could not be found for Binh Phuok Kratie Rubber 1 Company and Binh Phuok Kratie Rubber 2 Company yesterday.

Indochina Gateway Capital Limited Chairman Alastair Walton did not reply to inquiries from the Post.

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