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Authorities excavate luxury timber that was uncovered in an economic land concession last week in Stung Treng's Sesan district. PHOTO SUPPLIED

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## Luxury wood found buried

Mon, 17 February 2014 Phak Seangly and Daniel Pye

A Chinese-owned firm in Stung Treng province has been accused by local officials of illegally felling more than 150 endangered trees and burying the luxury timber in a vast plantation nestled between the Sesan and Srepok rivers.

Voeurn Sambath, chief of Kbal Romeas commune in Stung Treng's Sesan district, said yesterday that employees of Siv Guek Investment Co Ltd, which is owned by Chinese conglomerate Huayue Group, illegally felled the trees late last week.

"We saw many holes, and so we sent a bulldozer and [Forestry Administration] workers are unearthing it," Sambath said, adding that the workers had so far found 154 pieces of Thnong wood along with several other varieties of protected tree.

More than 70 pieces of timber were transported to Kbal Romeas and Srekor communes' Forestry Administration offices over the weekend, Sambath said.

"Burying the timber does not comply with the law; it seems the company is trying to hide from the authorities," he added.

Siv Guek's economic land concession (ELC) lies less than 10 kilometres from the Lower Sesan II hydropower dam site, where complaints over illegal logging led the government to suspend a Royal Group logging concession in October last year. Siv Guek's land concession overlaps in several areas with logging concessions for the Srepok II reservoir, according to mapping data from Open Development Cambodia.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture website, Siv Guek was granted a 10,000-hectare economic land concession in the Sesan district on January 24, 2006, to plant a number of cash crops, including rubber and acacia trees.

A Siv Guek employee, who did not give his name as he was not authorised to speak to the media, yesterday claimed the firm had not broken any laws, and said he had legal documents to show it had been granted the rights to log and bury the wood. The employee added that the wood was buried to protect it from the sun.

"Those logs need to be buried in order to protect them from forest

fires and sun light, since they will be cracked or the quality could be damaged,” he said, before hanging up the phone.

But Marcus Hardtke, program coordinator for German conservation group ARA, said that every aspect of the local officials’ allegations, if true, would be a breach of Cambodia’s Forestry Law.

“This is a common scenario. There’s no interest from the authorities in stopping it and everyone profits from it. It’s too late for rosewood, they’ve already moved onto the next species, Thnong,” Hardtke told the *Post*.

“Land concessions are not even supposed to be issued in forests, but the companies just claim there’s no forest there. Logging endangered tree species is illegal under the Cambodian law on forestry, and they are deliberately not demarcating the concessions so that this kind of thing can happen.”

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