Ministry of Environment left out of Stung Treng land deals

The Prime Minister has signed off on two new economic land concessions in Stung Treng and the Ministry of Environment has been kept in the dark about the deal.

The two new concessions cover a total of 19,917 hectares in Kom Phun and Kbal Romeas communes, Sesan district, about 22 kms from Stung Treng town, according to documents obtained by the Post.

A 9,917-hectare concession was granted to Sal Sophea Peanich Co. Ltd and a 10,000-hectare plot to Sopheak Nika Investment Agro-Industrial Plants Co. Ltd, according to the documents and confirmed by provincial officials.

The plots have been set aside for growing acacia trees, although no environmental or social impact assessments have been conducted.

Both companies are believed to be owned by oknha Na Marady.

Sal Sophea, owner of Sal Sophea Peanich and son-in-law of Marady, told the Post by phone September 15 that he did not know exactly where his new land concession was located or what he was going to plant because the investment was Marady’s idea.

Sophea said his company was only established in March and had never conducted any business.

A man who identified himself as Sopheak’s driver answered the phone number listed for Sopheak Nika Investment Agro-Industrial Plants on September 16 and confirmed that the company belongs to Marady. In earlier phone calls, a man named Sopheak answered but said he was not the owner of the company and had to speak with his boss before talking to media.

On July 25, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), Chan Sarun, wrote to Prime Minister Hun Sen, asking for permission to award the concessions.

The next day, the PM signed two letters giving Sarun the green light...
to award the
land to the companies and Sarun confirmed that official approval was
communicated
to the companies August 8.

Mok Mareth, Minister of the Environment, said he had not received
any information
about offering new concessions in Stung Treng and warned of the
dangers of inappropriate
agriculture.

"Planting too many acacia trees causes increasing loses of the
underground water
source and other environmental impacts," Mareth said.

"They have not given me the documents in order for me to go and
check [the concession],"
he said. "By the environmental law, they must inform us in order for
us to do
an environmental social impact assessment [on the land concession]
with participation
from other ministries and related NGOs."

Chan Sarun, confirmed September 15 that his ministry offered more
than 8,000 hectares
in land concessions to the two local companies and he said the terrain
was not very
fertile and covered only with undergrowth.

However, an official at the Stung Treng provincial environment
department said in
condition of anonymity that the area was covered with jungle
including tall trees
and wild animals such as elephants and tigers. The official also noted
that some
of the land was occupied by villagers who had planted rice fields.

A study conducted in 2000 by the Stung Treng forestry office of MAFF
reported that
between 94 and 96 percent of land in the province was covered by
jungle of very tall
trees and a secondary canopy, said Tep Bunnarith, director of the
Culture and Environment
Preservation Association (CEPA), which works on Se San river issues.

"If the land concessions are really on 'uneconomic land', why offer
concessions
in Stung Treng and not in Prey Veng or Svay Rieng?" said Bunnarith, referring
to provinces without major jungle.

"We were surprised to hear that the development was not known
about by the public
[and] even related organizations did not know about it. They [MAFF]
did not respect
EIA [environmental impact assessment]," he said.

Chan Sarun told the Post September 15 that he would ask the
Ministry of Environment
and related organizations to do an EIA when the two companies
started operating.

The new concessions in Stung Treng come as a list of economic land
concessions issued
by MAFF an embassy was leaked to press.

It lists two other concessions in Stung Treng, a 7,400-hectare teak
tree plantation

awarded to "company of Cassava powder production" and a 5,000-
hectare plot

granted in May to GG World Group (Cambodia) Development Ltd, also
for teak.

While the GG World concession is listed as "boundary defined and
being process

of planting [sic]", Bunnarith said there was little activity on the site.

However, he called on the government to investigate the other
company, known locally

as the Flour Manufacturing Co. A provincial official said the company
had mostly

cut trees in and nearby the land concession located on the
Cambodian-Laos border.

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