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# The Phnom Penh Post

## Ministry of Environment left out of Stung Treng land deals

Fri, 23 September 2005 Sam Rith

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.

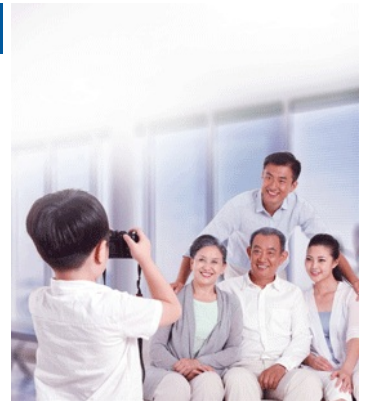
On July 25, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), Chan Sarun, wrote

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

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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 losses 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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