Some of the families in a protracted land dispute with a pair of Thai-owned sugar plantations in Koh Kong province say they were pressured over the weekend into signing compensation deals with the firms they could not read, because they were written in Thai, and without their lawyers present.

Rights groups say more than 400 families have lost their homes or farms since the plantations—both majority owned by Thailand’s KSL—were set up in 2006 and been driven into debt, often having to pull their children out of school.

On Saturday, 18 of those families accepted $2,000 each from the plantations, then signed documents written in Thai that they say they did not understand and were not explained to them. Five of those families are among 200 involved in a class-action lawsuit filed in London against the U.K. and U.S.-owned firms that bought sugar from the plantations for two years—Tate & Lyle Industries and T & L Sugar, respectively.

Chhun Kuong, who says he lost eight hectares to the plantations, was one of the 200 parties to the London lawsuit who took the cash Saturday.

Contacted Sunday, Mr. Kuong said he believed the $2,000 was only for the land he lost and that he had not given up his claim to compensation from the U.K. and U.S. firms that bought the sugar that was grown on it. But he admitted that he had no idea what the documents he signed actually said.

“The company gave me an envelope with the money, then after I counted it, they gave me a document to sign,” he said Sunday. “I signed the document even though it was in Thai and I don’t know what it said.”

Mr. Kuong, a local police officer, said a superior put pressure on him to take the money and sign.

“I took the compensation because I work at the district police station and my boss pressured me to accept,” he said. “It is hard for me to explain, but you should understand what it’s like when you work for someone and you have a problem with them.”

Eth Kong, who says he lost 10 hectares, said he also took the cash and signed the Thai-language document the company placed in front of him without providing a translation or explanation of its contents.

“I took the cash yesterday from the company because my family is running out of money,” he said.

The families were not given copies of the deals they signed, either.

Thananot Tuaprakhon, a section manager for one of the plantations who attended Saturday’s payouts at the company’s office in Koh Kong, initially told a reporter Sunday that the documents were provided not only in Thai, but also in Khmer and English.

However, when told that the villagers who took the cash claimed otherwise, Mr. Thananot said he was no longer sure.

“I am not sure whether the documents were in Thai, English and Khmer because I was far away from the people who signed the documents,” he said.

Mr. Thananot refused to say what the documents said.

After the signing, more than 100 of the families who refused the plantations’ latest effort to settle the long-running dispute protested in front of their commune office to ask for the government’s help.

“The people protested to show that they don’t want the money; they want their land back so that they can farm,” said An Haya, a representative of the families and a party to the court case in London.

According to documents obtained Sunday, the U.K. law firm representing the 200 families, Leigh Day, had asked the plantations to postpone Saturday’s meeting with their clients after getting wind of their plans.

In a series of letters dated October 12, Thanakorn Burinratchart, the plantations’ general manager, invited the European Union (E.U.) and several rights groups to observe the payouts on Saturday.

On October 20, Leigh Day sent Mr. Thanakorn a letter asking him to hold off, so that the law firm and the Community Legal Education Center (CLEC), a local NGO helping the families, could consult with and counsel their clients.

“Neither CLEC nor Leigh Day was informed of this meeting,” the law firm says in the letter. “It is important that our clients are given the opportunity to seek appropriate advice on any offer you make…. On this basis we consider that the meeting on 25th October should be postponed.”

But Mr. Thananot, the plantation section manager, said the meeting went ahead because KSL was eager to win back its U.K. buyer—most of the sugar from the plantations has since gone to other European countries, according to the E.U.’s latest trade figures—and hoped to settle with the rest of the families within three months.

On Saturday, the E.U., which sent an official to observe the payouts, said the families should have a chance to talk to their representatives and understand any deal they might make with the plantations before more cash is handed out.

“Any attempts to find a solution need to be done through a straightforward and transparent dialogue with the communities and their representatives,” the E.U.’s country office said in a statement.
“All affected communities need to be able to get a proper understanding of what is offered, consult their partners and make informed decisions. Only with their active involvement a permanent resolution to the situation that is satisfactory to all can be achieved.”

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