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Bunong Minority Villagers Protest Against Rubber Company

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About 80 ethnic Bunong villagers living in Mondolkiri's Pech Chreada district staged a protest against the Socfin-KCD rubber company Monday, demanding that the firm honor its long-standing pledge to return 1,000 hectares of farmland located inside its concession.

"The protest took place because the rubber company has ignored its promise to return 1,000 hectares of rotation farmland to 100 minority families," Phlang Sin, 52, a representative of 1,000 Bunong families in Bosra commune, said yesterday. "The rotation farmland claimed by our people has been planted with rubber trees."

Socfin-KCD, a joint venture between Socfin, a Luxembourg-based

holding company, and Cambodia's Khaou Chuly Group, has been accused by rights groups of forcing villagers into selling their land. Back in 2008, hundreds of villagers torched and smashed vehicles belonging to the rubber company and confronted armed police.

Using traditional methods, Bunong people farm communally on large tracts of land which they rotate between annually—rather than smaller, individual plots.

Mr. Sin said that following the half-hour demonstration outside Socfin-KDC's offices, two of the protesters met with representatives of the firm in an attempt to resolve the conflict. Although not present at the meeting, Mr. Sin said the company had agreed to demarcate the 1,000 hectares of contested land for the villagers.

Bosra commune chief Yoeth Sarin also said that Socfin-KDC was working toward a resolution for the villagers. "People demanded the return of their rotation farmland," Mr. Sarin said. "The company is working with us to resolve this matter."

An official at Socfin-KCD said officials from the company had traveled to Mondolkiri specifically to meet with the demonstrators.

"The plantation manager went [to Mondolkiri] to solve this problem...and the general manager also," Pao Saream, an assistant manager at the company, said without elaborating.

Last year, the International Federation for Human Rights called on Socfin-KCD to suspend operations until it resolves the dispute with the Bunong families.