

## **Eviction and Resistance in Cambodia: Five women tell their stories**

### **Case studies**

**Mai**, 48, a mother of eight from Oddar Meanchey province, north-west Cambodia, was five months pregnant when she watched her home and all her possessions go up in flames.

In 2008, the Cambodian government granted three economic land concessions to three affiliated companies for an agro-industrial sugar plantation in Oddar Meanchey province. The authorities did not consult the families living in the area and began threatening and intimidating them to leave their homes and farming land. In April 2008 workers alleged to be company workers destroyed some 150 homes.

In October 2009, Mai watched helplessly as her home and 118 other houses in her village, Bos, were bulldozed and burned to the ground by a force of 150 police, military police, and other individuals believed to be workers from the Angkor Sugar company. Many of the families were left destitute, some made homeless as a result of the forced eviction. *"My house, possessions, clothes, all went up in smoke. Nothing was left," said Mai.*

In October 2009, Mai travelled more than 250km from her home in Oddar Meanchey to Phnom Penh, to ask Prime Minister Hun Sen to help her community get its land back. For her efforts, she was accused of violating the forestry law and arrested. Eight months later, in June 2010, Mai was released, but only after she signed an agreement to withdraw all claims to her land.

Today, nothing remains of Mai's village. Instead, armed company workers guard a sugar cane plantation surrounded by empty fields. Over the past decade, the government has increasingly granted land concessions to Cambodian and foreign private investors. Challenges to the legal validity of economic land concessions have generally not been successful.

Mai has been left destitute and struggles to provide for her eight children. She feels abandoned by the government and blames the local authorities: *"I do not know what to hope for anymore," she says. "It is all gone."*

**Sophal** is 31. She and her inner-city community at Dey Krahorm village, Phnom Penh, resisted eviction for over three years, until the night it was stormed by hundreds of police and company workers who decimated the village in just a few hours.

In December 2006, a private development company called 7NG was granted title to the land at Dey Krahorm after community leaders, unknown to the community, were persuaded to swap their land. Residents were pressured by the company and the authorities to move to Damnak Trayoung, 20km from the centre of Phnom Penh, or agree to US\$8,000 dollars compensation. Hundreds of families left. *"I arrived in the land of Damnak Trayoung and walked around. I felt really helpless. And I was angry. I hated them," says Sophal.*

Sophal's family did not accept the offer, and the remaining residents resisted the eviction, organizing press conferences and concerts that showed the public a flourishing community determined to fight for its rights. In January 2009, the company offered the remaining households \$20,000 to move. Several families immediately took the offer, and attempts at a further, fairer negotiation were in vain.

In January 2009, the remaining 400 families at Dey Krahorm were forcibly evicted. In a final show of solidarity and resistance, the frightened residents joined hands round the village. They were attacked by hundreds of police and privately paid demolition workers armed with axes, hammers, iron bars and electric batons. Police fired rubber bullets and used tear gas and water cannons on residents as they tried to gather their possessions. In a matter of hours, Dey Krahorm village no longer existed.

Families who did not "own" their houses were eventually moved to a resettlement site in Kandal province, 40 km away from Phnom Penh, some living in dire poverty.

**Hong** is Kuy, one of Cambodia's Indigenous Peoples who live in the Prey Lang forest, in northern Cambodia. The forest underpins the livelihoods of some 200,000 people who live in the villages surrounding Prey Lang. Hong leads her community in a battle to protect their land and natural resources.

The forest has increasingly come under threat from companies exploiting its natural resources. As of 2010, at least 27 economic land concessions and mining licences have been granted over parts of the greater Prey Lang area. These companies have rarely engaged with the community, and Hong is not aware of how company plans might affect her village.

After a Cambodian NGO visited the village to motivate and train local people, Hong emerged as an active community leader. Today she spends her time organizing petitions and protests, and joining community forest patrols. These opportunities have changed Hong's life and helped to challenge community perceptions about women's roles: *'Now I am so proud of myself. I have made something happen and am a woman leader,'* she says.

Despite Hong's efforts, the threats to Prey Lang remain, and new companies have been given concessions for large areas of land that people rely on. *"Prey Lang is the shelter of Indigenous People, like a house we live in, a house that is full of freedom. If Prey Lang is gone it's impossible for us to live,"* says Hong.

**Heap's** husband was arrested and imprisoned on spurious charges the same day the authorities took all her village's farming land. With no land and an absent husband, she was suddenly left alone to make ends meet for herself and her four young children.

On 22 March 2009, 175 families from Chi Krong commune, Siem Reap province, were forcibly evicted from the farmland they had depended on for their food and livelihoods since the late 1980s. Around 80 farmers from Chi Krong were on the disputed land when they were surrounded by police and government authorities, who demanded that they leave the area. When the farmers refused to leave, the police opened fire, shooting and seriously injuring four of the villagers. Nine villagers, including Heap's husband Savoeun, were arrested and convicted for various crimes and imprisoned after unfair trials; three other Chi Krong villagers were detained in the following months. In April 2011, two years after he was arrested, Savoeun was released. According to Heap, Savoeun was forced to sign a pledge not to claim any rights to their rice field or try to access the land, or face arrest.

The Chi Krong families remain barred from their farmland. *"When I have 1 or 2 kg of rice I share some with others... We face the difficulties together,"* Heap says.

*"For those with power and money, what they do is always right. The government does not help its citizens become rich. The government only helps the rich oppress the poor."*

**Vanny** is one of the leading figures in a high profile struggle against the largest forced eviction since the Khmer Rouge era. Vanny lives in what remains of the Boeung Kak Lake area of central Phnom Penh, an area of prime real estate once home to around 20,000 people.

In 2007, a private development company, Shukaku Inc, was granted a 99-year lease over the site. In 2008, some 20,000 residents living in the area, who had not been informed of development plans, were threatened with eviction. In August 2008, Shukaku started filling in the lake. Families were offered US \$8,500 or a flat at a resettlement site on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Families living around the lake began facing threats and intimidation, and many felt they had no option but to leave. Many of them have since experienced severe hardship.

Vanny decided to join those resisting eviction in 2009. Today she is one of the most outspoken community representatives, mobilising people to join protests outside City Hall and the company's office. Local residents depend on her advice and support: *"I continue to mobilize the community to strengthen [the people's] spirit so that the community can stay firm and independent and can convince the government to change its mind,"* Vanny says.

Vanny and other community leaders represent the community's views in meetings with the World Bank and bilateral donors to Cambodia. Their resistance has paid off. In August, the Prime Minister signed an order for an area of the Boeung Kak Lake development site to be given to the remaining residents for onsite housing. While it is unclear how this will work, and the plan will not benefit everyone, it is a major victory for the community.