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## Cambodia: Paving forested lands for gambling resorts

Cambodia's biggest national park, Botum Sakor, will now host a 340-km<sup>2</sup>-infrastructure project led by the real-estate company from northern China, Tianjin Union Development Group. Biodiverse forests will be transformed into a city-sized gambling resort for "extravagant feasting and revelry", and local villagers are already being forced away from their homes.

Union Group's plans include a network of roads, including a four-lane highway, an international airport, a port for large cruise ships, two reservoirs, condominiums, hotels, hospitals, golf courses and a casino. The worksites along the 64 km highway house a number of Chinese engineers, and are guarded by Cambodian soldiers. Access to the resort area itself is blocked by a provincial park ranger who has back up from military police.

The project intends to move the remaining villagers to houses some 10 km inland. However, as one of the villagers described, the new area has "no work, no water, no school, no temple. Just malaria." Nhorn Saroen, 52, was among hundreds of families who have already been moved. "We were told it was Chinese land and we couldn't cut down a single tree," he says. "Some people refused to leave. Their land was taken and now they have nothing." He was provided with a house in a purpose-built village far inland, robbing him of his main livelihood: fishing. Another villager told that the forests behind his new house belong to the Chinese company, "If we even dare to cut a piece of a tree we can be jailed or have to pay compensation of about 100 dollars per tree, according to the local authorities"

In 2013, the Cambodian government granted so-called economic land concessions to scores of companies to develop 7,631 km<sup>2</sup> of land, most of it in national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. The area of concessions granted has risen six-fold between 2010 and 2011, partly a reflection of China's economic influence spreading deeper into Southeast Asia.

Land-grabbing, illegal logging and forced evictions have long been common in Cambodia. But by granting land concessions, the government has effectively legalized these practices in the country's last remaining wilderness. "It's been my land since my grandparents' generation," says Srey Khmao, 68, from Thmar Sar. "I lived peacefully there until Union Group threatened the villagers and told them to remove their belongings."

Cambodia's 2001 land law forbids economic land concessions greater than 10,000 hectares. But Union Group won a 99-year lease thanks to a 2008 royal decree which carved out 36,000 hectares from Botum Sakor and redefined it. In the same year, a contract was signed by the Minister of Environment and the chief of Union Group's board of directors. The company was granted a further 9,100 adjoining hectares last year to build a hydroelectric dam.

A spokesperson from Union Group said that its road network was welcomed by people in the area. "Residents said they finally saw real roads and cars," she says. "In this regard, I think we have contributed to Cambodia." China is both the largest foreign investor and source of foreign aid. That

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aid, often in the form of no-strings-attached infrastructure projects, has made Prime Minister Hun Sen less reliant on Western donors.

Maps produced by the Cambodian human rights group Licadho show huge leaseholds at the heart of wildlife sanctuaries, such as Boeng Per and Phnom Aural, while 19 concessions have swallowed up almost all of Virachey national park on Cambodia's remote border with Laos and Vietnam. However, the concessions and infrastructure projects are facing strong pockets of resistance. "The Chinese company is threatening our villages. We refuse to leave our homes in the area", denounces a woman fearing eviction.

## **Mine Railways**

A 400 km railway and a new port are under planning for the Preah Vihear province in Cambodia. These projects will entail severe environmental and social impacts as well as the loss of traditional lands and access to resources for local populations. On top of this, the railway and the port will mainly serve the needs of the mining industries in the region.

Cambodia Iron and Steel Mining Industry Group, or CISMIG, has a government license to explore about 130,000 hectares of the iron ore near the Rovieng town, Preah Vihear province. In January 2013, CISMIG signed an agreement with two state-owned Chinese companies to construct 400 km of railway and a port, joining a steel processing plant in the Preah Vihear province in the north to a new port in Koh Kong province on the gulf of Thailand in the south.

There are multiple companies with exploration rights in Preah Vihear and neighboring provinces. No major mines are yet active in the area, but it is feasible that future iron ore mines could supply the CISMIG steel plant with raw materials. Additionally, mines producing other types of minerals may seek to utilize the railway tracks in order to transport minerals out of the remote north and north-eastern provinces. Besides, according to the chairman of CISMIG, the port will be capable of handling around 50 million tons of goods a year.

It is very difficult to predict how many people and which areas will be directly affected by the project due to the limited information publicly available. The exact route of the railway is still not clear, although, with over 400 km, it can be expected to affect a considerable amount of lands under use by Cambodians for agriculture and/or residence.

The Rovieng town is located in close proximity to the already threatened Prey Lang forest. Increased infrastructure may also contribute to expansion of other industries in the area, as well as along the railway route, creating further pressure on the forest and vital watersheds. Many residents in the Rovieng area are indigenous peoples, and there are already cases of indigenous communities coming into conflict with mining companies conducting exploration in the area.

On the other side, the coastal town of Koh Kong is still heavily forested, and in order to reach the coast, the railway line would have to pass through the Botum Sakor National Park. Depending on the route of the railway, it may also pass through or impact on the Beng Per Wildlife Sanctuary, Aural Wildlife Sanctuary, Central Cardamom Mountains Protected Area, and Koh Kong Protected Forest. The railway would also have to pass through the land concessions of the Union Development Group (1). Works are currently on hold despite plans to begin construction last year due to funding problems (2). Nonetheless, the project, which expects to finish constructions by 2017, would be the biggest infrastructure 'development' in Cambodia's history.

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Information extracted from the article and video by Andrew Marshall and Prak Chan Thul, Reuters, "Insight: China gambles on Cambodia's shrinking forests", [www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/07/us-cambodia-forests-idUSTRE82607N20120307](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/07/us-cambodia-forests-idUSTRE82607N20120307); and the briefing paper by Equitable Cambodia and Focus on the Global South, "The Chinese North-South Railway Project", <http://focusweb.org/sites/www.focusweb.org/files/Cambodia-China-Railway-Development-BRIEF-EN.pdf>

Notes:

(1) Daniel Carteret, 22 April 2014, *The Phnom Penh Post*, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/lack-funds-delays-railway>

(2) Idem.