
[Territories being seized in Cambodia: protecting corporate profits](#)

Violent, systematic grabbing of peasants and indigenous peoples' territories in Cambodia is resulting in a threefold increase in the number of families affected by land conflicts during 2014 when compared to the previous year (1). The Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) launched a "land concession dataset" in March 2015, showing the vast areas of corporate seizure and use of land in Cambodia (2). Further, areas under a REDD project claiming to "preserve" communal forests in the country are being cleared and communities being displaced in order to "open up" space for private profits.

In 2014 alone, LICADHO registered 10,625 families, or an estimated 49,519 individuals, newly affected by land conflicts. A detailed list of the documented cases (3), mostly confined to 13 provinces where LICADHO has field offices, show the involvement of mining operations, tree plantations, agribusiness, hydroelectric construction, among others, as well as the military and security state officials. The affected families in 2014 represent more than three times the number of families documented in 2013 (3,475) as well as nearly twice the number recorded in 2012 (5,672). Many of those land conflicts have led to forced evictions. These are frequently violent and state forces are commonly deployed against civilians to protect private sector interests and their own gain.

Due to the government's lack of transparency, the information LICADHO has collated for the "land concession dataset" remains incomplete. However, the dataset already shows the large amount of concessions given for rubber plantations and extraction, sugar and cassava, as well as plantations for palm oil and for pulp and paper. Many other concession areas though remain "unknown" in terms of extension, ownership and use (4).

The Cambodian government keeps denying the serious situation confronted by peasants and indigenous peoples who are forced to stand up to defend their territories. A previous statement by LICADHO, from April 2014, already warned of the increasing "wave" of land conflicts. As LICADHO director, Naly Pilorge, said at the time, "each number represents a potentially ruined life, an individual who faces severe and long-term hardship. Without land, they no longer have the means to provide the basic requirements for a decent life." (5) As a reaction to the statement, the government staged a press conference to claim publicly that LICADHO's findings were "not real". Less than four months later, a 19-year-old Cambodian was shot and killed by soldiers, who fired on a group of peasants involved in a land dispute with the military unit in Preah Vihear province.

According to the human rights organization, the renewed "wave" of conflicts comes after the government's May 2012 directive, which suspended the granting of new economic land concessions and ordered a systematic review of existing concessions. That directive was followed in late 2012 and early 2013 by a land-titling program for large extensions of areas, including communal lands. However, a loophole allowed land concessions that were "already in the pipeline" to be issued after the directive. In the seven months following the moratorium announcement, a total of 208,805

hectares of land was handed over to concessionaires (6). The land-titling program appears to be a complete failure. As LICADHO says, “one part of the country in which the government claims to have reallocated land from a concession and granted titles to villagers is the area in Preah Vihear province in which the indigenous Kuoy continue to struggle to save their forests” (7).

The government must disclose all of its land dealings to the public. However, to date the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) has published an oversimplified and incomplete list of companies; the Ministry of Environment (MOE) has done even less, simply releasing the total number of companies involved and the total land area leased. Neither ministry has disclosed the exact location of the over 2.1 million hectares of Cambodian land covered by existing land concessions.

REDD in Cambodia

The “Oddar Meanchey Community Forestry REDD project”, set up in 2008, is run by the Cambodian branch of a US-based NGO called PACT and Cambodia’s Forestry Administration. PACT Cambodia brought in Terra Global Capital, a US-based carbon trading firm, although no credits have yet been issued. The project claims that the aim is to protect 13 community forests managed by 58 villages. The community forests range in size from 400 hectares to over 18,000 hectares, and cover a total of around 65 thousand hectares.

In November 2011, a US Government agency, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), provided US\$ 900,000 in political risk insurance for Terra Global Capital, the private investor in the project. The insurance protects US investors against various possibilities, including war, civil strife, coups, terrorism and other politically-motivated violence, as well as host government interference such as expropriation, among others. OPIC’s support for Terra Global Capital is the world’s first political risk insurance coverage for a REDD project (8).

Despite that the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) is the one in charge to establish community forests, the Cambodian military has been clearing forest in the area of the Thai border, including the REDD project’s community forest areas, for several years. In 2012, the military told the head of the community forest network, Sar Thlai, that it would take over 2,500 hectares in two of the community forests. Sar Thlai told the *Cambodia Daily* that the military had set up bases in at least six of the 13 community forests in recent years (9). Further, in April 2013, two armed soldiers stopped community forest patrollers and forced them to hand over two chainsaws and 100 planks of luxury timber that they had seized from illegal loggers. The soldiers said that the logging was to construct a new building for their garrison (10).

Deforestation continues in and around the community forests in Oddar Meanchey province and REDD is doing nothing to stop this. Threats include companies and armed forces moving into the area and large-scale economic land concessions. In 2014, the *Cambodia Daily* reported that villagers from Banteay Ampil district found five armed Cambodian soldiers bulldozing their community forest. The community forest is part of the Oddar Meanchey REDD project (11) and the MAFF is doing nothing to stop this.

Large-scale concessions have had a track record of destroying livelihoods and forests. Cambodia’s leading campaigner against illegal logging and land grabs, Chut Wutty, was shot dead by military police in 2012, while guiding two journalists from the *Cambodia Daily* to investigate illegal logging in the Cardamom Mountains in Koh Kong province (12). “Cambodians have the right and need to know who occupies areas next to their homes,” said LICADHO Director, Naly Pilorge. Urgent action is required to support communities struggling to avert this continuing plunder.

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1. <http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/pressrelease.php?perm=374>
 2. http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/land_concessions/
 3. <http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/press/files/LICADHO-ConflictsData2014-English.pdf>
 4. See note (1)
 5. <http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/pressrelease.php?perm=342>
 6. <https://www.globalwitness.org/campaigns/land-deals/rubberbarons/>
 7. See note (5)
 8. <http://climatemarkets.org/topics/public-sector-ifis-and-leveraging-private-finance/fact-sheet-about-the-module-topic#sdendnote3anc>
 9. <http://www.redd-monitor.org/2014/06/13/military-clearing-of-community-forests-in-oddar-meanchey-cambodia-photos/>
 10. <http://www.redd-monitor.org/2013/06/21/oddar-meanchey-redd-project-runs-into-problems-selling-carbon-credits-as-the-cambodian-government-misses-deal-signing-deadline/>
 11. <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/archives/military-continues-to-cut-down-forest-and-carbon-credits-50964/>
 12. <http://www.redd-monitor.org/2012/04/27/environmental-activist-chut-wutty-shot-dead-in-cambodia/>