
Cambodia: Steps to Victory

After several years of struggle, rural communities in the province of Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia, are seeing signs of victory. Three private companies that had acquired approximately 20,000 hectares of farm- and forestland for sugarcane plantations have withdrawn and their concessions have been cancelled. The companies are “Angkor Sugar Company Ltd” and “Cambodia Cane and Sugar Valley Company Ltd” in Kounkriel Commune, Samraung District, and “Tonle Sugar Cane Company Ltd” in Pong Ro Commune, Changkal District.

In November 2014, representatives from communities affected by the sugarcane plantations heard from the Oddar Meanchey Provincial Governor’s office that the companies would be asked to shut down their operations. By December 2014, the machinery and workers in all three plantations were gone, although surrounding communities did not have a clear indication from the government whether the concessions had indeed been cancelled. In March 2015, the communities were informed that the Cambodian Government had issued a special order (*sor chor nor*) claiming all the land in the concession areas back as state land. At the time of writing, however, the communities have not yet seen this order.

Local peoples’ struggles against these companies and against sugarcane plantations in Cambodia have been long and hard. The above mentioned sugarcane plantations in Oddar Meanchey started in 2007, with major shares owned by “Mitr Phol Sugar Group”, a multinational corporation from Thailand. The concessions were also linked to the “L.Y.P Group Co. Ltd”, a Cambodian corporation owned by wealthy Cambodian tycoon and senator Ly Yong Phat. Although the L.Y.P Group denied direct investment in the above concessions, District authorities told affected communities that the senator was in charge of managing all these concessions.

In April 2008 and October 2009, villagers in Bos and O’Bat Moan villages were violently evicted and left homeless and landless. Village lands and houses of 254 families were burned and bulldozed by hired workers supervised by military police and Cambodian army troops from Brigade 42, known to be supported by the L.Y.P. Group. The evicted families were left in extremely precarious conditions without food, water or shelter, and to date have yet to receive compensation or reparations for this injustice. Acts of violence and intimidation against local people continued by hired staff of the three companies and the police assigned to protect them. The concessions encroached into community forests and cut off local peoples’ access to forests and farmlands.

Affected communities organized in the province and nationally with the support of community based networks and NGOs supporting struggles for justice. They filed petitions and complaints in the Oddar Meanchey courts, governor’s office and to national authorities seeking compensation for those evicted, for confiscated farmlands and to prevent further encroachment by the companies into their community forests. Affected communities also sought and received support from networks and NGOs in Thailand, which publicly questioned the bad conduct of a Thai company in a neighboring

country. In 2013, a petition demanding that the Angkor Sugar Company compensate the people evicted from Bos/O'Batmon area in Kounkriel was submitted to the Human Rights Commission of Thailand.

In December 2013, affected communities filed a petition with the Cambodian Ministry of Agriculture asking for cancellation of the concession agreements signed with Angkor Sugar, Cambodia Cane and Sugar Valley and Tonle Sugar. The petition claimed that the companies were not following the relevant laws and sub-decrees and had large tracts of land unused within their concession areas. Therefore, the Cambodian Government should cancel the concession contracts of the three companies and return all the lands to the communities for use as community forests, farming and common/public lands.

Affected communities in Oddar Meanchey also joined with their counterparts in Koh Kong province to file petitions with the European Union (EU) since sugar produced from sugarcane in these plantations had duty-free access to European markets under the "Everything But Arms" initiative of the EU (1). In January 2014, an EU delegation went to visit these concession areas and met representatives of the affected communities.

The struggles of people in Oddar Meanchey to reclaim lands and get justice have included actions and campaigning at multiple levels and fronts, which have finally paid off. Village residents have started to make plans for land use and management for the approximately 20,000 hectares released from the concessions. These include restoration of farm, home and village lands for those who were evicted and/or lost part of their land to encroachment; revitalization of community forests and; building collective farming activities as a buffer against future crises. They are also continuing to press Angkor Sugar Company and Mitr Phol Sugar Group to pay compensation to those who were evicted from Bos/O'Bat Moan.

The battle, however, is far from over. While the provincial authorities have expressed verbal support for the plans of the local communities, there is as yet no official communication from them permitting these plans to be operationalized. A persisting threat in Oddar Meanchey is the military, which has set up camps in numerous forests in the province. Many of these forests were included in the Oddar Meanchey REDD project and have already been destroyed by the establishment of camps, roads and housing for soldiers' families. The military has expressed intent to establish bases and villages for their soldiers in the areas vacated by the companies, which include community forests. In July 2015, the provincial governor ordered district authorities and all relevant departments to work with local communities in mapping their community forests. However, community leaders report that such processes turn out to be expensive since they are expected to host and cover the costs of the officials involved in the mapping.

The village residents are committed to continue the process of negotiating with national and provincial authorities to limit military and corporate presence and maximize community governance of the lands.

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(1) "Everything But Arms" is a trade initiative of the European Union adopted in 2001 to give least developed countries full duty-free and quota-free access to the EU for exports other than arms and armaments. The initiative has been surrounded with human rights abuses and land evictions associated with the products exported to the EU under this initiative.

