Thailand: Assassinated Village Conservationist

Samnao Srisongkhram (1965-2003), who was shot in the head and killed by a hired gunman on 25 May, was a village leader praised for his work defending the interests of fellow farmers in an area of Thailand's Northeast affected by pollution from a large pulp mill. He was 38.

Samnao, of Khambongpattana village in Khon Kaen province, was President of the local Phong River Conservation Club. He had played a part in monitoring and ensuring compensation for the effects of pollution from the Phoenix Pulp and Paper Company since 1996.

A member of a committee created by the Prime Minister's Office to handle grievances against Phoenix and of a committee set up by the governor of Khon Kaen province to look into agricultural damage caused by Phoenix's waste water disposal scheme, Samnao also worked on official plans for river conservation and was active in conservation camps for young people as well as regional environmental activities. The pollution monitoring and enforcement efforts of the local organizations he helped lead are widely credited with bringing about improvements in water and air quality around the Phoenix mill.

Samnao was killed while sitting and talking quietly with his assassin at his family's rice-field hut following a villagers' meeting to consider plans for a project to develop women's leadership in his village. Samnao's infant daughter was by his side and his wife nearby. The assassin, a stranger to the area, had approached Samnao posing as an NGO activist from North Thailand seeking information.

In July, police arrested a suspect in the murder in Southern Thailand. According to police sources, the suspect fingered the headman of Samnao's own subdistrict, Khoke Soong, as the person who had hired him to carry out the killing. The headman, who has also been arrested, has longstanding ties with Phoenix, but local observers are skeptical about whether he and the gunman are the only people involved in the shooting.

Phoenix runs two kraft pulp lines producing about 200,000 tons of pulp per year from bamboo, kenaf and eucalyptus. One uses elemental chlorine to bleach its pulp, the other chlorine compounds. Although Thailand lacks the capacity to monitor dioxins, other pollutants associated with the pulp industry have been consistently found across the neighbouring area. Before 1993, the firm's effluents were released directly into the Phong river, but, following a disastrous pollution incident, this was made illegal. Today, effluents from the two mills are treated together and then dumped in holding ponds before being released onto company eucalyptus plantations.

However, Phoenix has been hard put to find enough land to release the 25-28,000 cubic metres of effluent it needs to get rid of daily. Some waste water seeps into neighbouring farmers' fields and eventually into the Phong river, damaging soils, crops and fisheries. According to an agreement signed with the Ministry of Industry, the firm is obligated to acquire an additional tract of land to dump effluent on or have its permission to operate withdrawn by the end of this year. Phoenix has been trying to buy the new land from villagers.

Several villagers, however, especially those owning fertile bottom land at the mouth of a local tributary, had refused to sell. Backed by the Phong River Conservation Club, they also demanded proper compensation for land already spoiled by the factory's releases and gathered evidence to present to concerned government agencies. Worried about the approaching government deadline, Phoenix had been in contact with Samnao as part of its campaign to buy land and to bargain over compensation. According to locals, prior to the assassination, Samnao had received calls from Phoenix both issuing threats and offering bribes, which he refused.

Araya Nanthaphotedet, director of the government's 10th Regional Environment Office, expressed hope that all those behind the killing would be apprehended and convicted. She said Samnao had done very good work and was an admirable spokesperson for his fellow villagers.

"Just before he died, he had participated in a provincial-level meeting about solving the land problems of the factory that affected villagers," Araya said. "He was about to report back to the villagers. It's such a shame."

Samnao is remembered by friends and co-workers as a reserved and humble leader without personal or political ambitions who had no conflicts other than with Phoenix.

He is survived by his wife Mayuree and two children, a son, 7, and a daughter, 7 months. His place in the local conservation group is being taken by, among several others, Chawang Buochan, himself the survivor of a 1996 shooting whose perpetrator was never found. Contributions to the collection being made for Samnao's widow and children can be sent to the following account:

ACCOUNT NAME: Mrs Mayuree Srisongkram for Utain Srisongkram
BANK NAME: Krung Thai Bank
BRANCH: Ubonrat Branch, Khon Kaen province
SAVINGS ACCOUNT NUMBER: 4341298616

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