
Cambodia: Rubber plantation, deforestation and corruption

Since the 1960s, Cambodia has been promoting the rehabilitation of rubber plantations as well as the development of new ones. As long as rubber plantations involve using large areas of land, many people have been evicted from their traditional lands and many more have lost their livelihoods, to make way for the plantations (See WRM Bulletin N° 59).

The Chhup Rubber Plantation Company at Tumring Commune, Sandan District, Kompong Thom Province, launched on August 2001, will cover 6,200 hectares of rich red soil, "courtesy of the Colexim and Mieng Ly Heng logging companies", said In Horn, vice chief of the company.

However, the plantation has encroached deep into the neighbouring forest. Indeed, clear-cutting outside the plantation's boundaries was noticed by Marcus Hardtke, a logging monitor, and Eva Galabru, former country director of Cambodia's former official logging monitor, London-based Global Witness. They had seen a resin tree stump at five-hundred-fifty meters distance from the plantation, so they decided to survey the area. They walked a long distance, continuing on from the clear cut, down muddy oxcart trails and even some heavy machinery tread tracks until night fell, and found fresh logging sites, one after another, with nearly 20 remaining stumps, most of them blackened by fire and sticky with sap. Many of the resin stumps were found in the Tum Ar Spirit Forest and the villagers believed that people were getting sick and some dying because of the logging in the spirit forest. They stopped reporting the illegal logging to the forestry office as they said they believed that the forestry officials were part of the business network.

The trees felled had been producing resin, once a primary source of revenue for local people. In Chhan, a resident of Ronteah village in Tumring commune said he was angry about resin trees being cut. His family relied on the resin trees for living up until four or five years ago, when they disappeared, he said. Resin collectors play an active role in protecting the forest keeping their trees safe for a production which is environmentally sustainable (see WRM Bulletin N° 54 and 48). But now resin trees are cut, or else villagers are coerced into selling their resin trees.

Hardtke and Galabru estimated that logging companies have clear cut at least 15 to 20 hectares of the forest outside the boundaries of the rubber plantation. The area was cut in the last two months. Though Cambodia's forest legislation prohibit the cutting of trees villagers have tapped to collect resin, a popular loophole is to call the area being logged a land concession, something a rubber plantation qualifies for. Thus, both business complement each other; they have found a way to legalise the conversion of a portion of the richest lowland evergreen forest in Indochina into rubber.

A letter dated June 30 from the Working Group on Natural Resources Management --donor representatives who have pushed for logging reform-- to the Minister of Agriculture addressed developments at Tumring it classified as "troubling." Due to no prior analysis, "land clearance has run ahead of replanting, leaving large areas bare and exposed to erosion, communities have been displaced and lost their established livelihoods...and there are other problems...that we believe threaten the viability of the entire endeavor," the letter stated. "We are aware that illegal and uncontrolled log shipment is taking place, including from in and around the Tumring area", the letter

added.

Forestry Department Director Ty Sokhun denied that there is log transportation and tried to blame farmers for the clearing. Asked about the clear-cutting, In Horn explained that the vast size of the operation prevented him from staying abreast of everything happening at Tumring. "On the other hand, I'm not supposed to know too many things," he said.

However, it seems that there's more than ignorance in the business. Family links with the Prime Minister suggest a case of corruption. Local sources have reported that a Mrs Seng Keang is listed on a Department of Forestry and Wildlife document dated Feb 19, 2003, as the owner of illegally cut logs to be confiscated from Tumring. Seng Keang is the wife of Dy Choch, also better known as Hun Choch, who is the cousin of Prime Minister Hun Sen, and also the brother of Dy Phen, the military police commander of Kompong Thom province. Also, a brother of Seng Keang, Kok Heang known as Mr 95, --who was previously sub-contractor for Mieng Ly Heng Concession-- has been reported to be an influential man who has threatened people in the area.

There are indications that the Royal Government of Cambodia intends to develop similar rubber plantations in three other provinces.

The contribution of this kind of business to the "development" of the Tumring community or to Cambodia is seriously questionable. The strong vested interests linked to it no doubt obtain money from timber, but no environmental study was conducted, no consultation or delineation of the forest estate has been undertaken. Logging, guns and corruption go hand in hand in many places, and now in Cambodia it seems that rubber plantations have joined the crew.

Article based on information from: "Borders Unclear at K Thom Rubber Plantation", by Porter Barron, The Cambodia Daily, September 2, 2003.