Cambodia: Eucalyptus plantations and pulp production threaten forests and rivers

Forest and biodiversity conservation mean different things to different people. In the case of Cambodia, village people throughout the country depend on farmland, fisheries and forests for their livelihoods. For them, conserving the forest and its biodiversity implies ensuring their present and future means of survival. In recent years, even as peace has returned to rural areas, large scale logging concessions have reduced villagers' access and rights to forests, and caused massive damage to the forests themselves. Cambodia's villagers and their forests now face a new threat -- that of massive industrial tree plantations.

In January 2000, the Royal Government of Cambodia signed an agreement with the Pheapimex Group giving the company a 70-year right to "develop" 300,000 hectares of "spare forest" land in the provinces of Kampong Chhnang and Pursat in central Cambodia. Pheapimex intends to plant the land with eucalyptus trees to supply a planned pulp and paper mill in Kandal province.

In addition to wood, paper production requires huge amounts of chemicals, water and energy, and the process results in high levels of pollution. Mills release thousands of polluting substances into nearby waterways, including dissolved wood and chemicals which can reduce the oxygen levels in rivers and kill fish. The major waterway in central Cambodia is the Tonle Sap, a vast lake which flows into the Mekong at Phnom Penh and from there to the Mekong delta. The lake provides Cambodia with a large proportion of its fish and water from the Tonle Sap irrigates a huge area of rice fields. If the Tonle Sap became polluted by discharges from a pulp and paper mill it would have a disastrous impact on the livelihoods of thousands of people.

In December 2000, Pheapimex signed a joint venture agreement with the Chinese Farm Cooperation Group to build a pulp and paper mill. The US$70 million joint venture is financed by the Import-Export Bank of China, and forms part of a deal between the Chinese and Cambodian governments to boost trade and investment between the two countries. Under the terms of the loan, the companies will pay five per cent interest to the Cambodian government, but the Chinese bank will only charge three per cent.

The Secretary for Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery, Chan Tong Iv, told the Phnom Penh Daily he welcomed the deal and said the government's efforts to draw investment into the agriculture sector were bearing fruit. Pheapimex is well-placed to benefit from such deals -- Lao Meng Ken, Pheapimex's director, is also a special adviser for foreign investment to Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Pheapimex-Fuchan, a Taiwanese joint venture with the Pheapimex Group is the largest logging concession holder in Cambodia, with more than 700,000 hectares of concessions. According to Global Witness, Pheapimex-Fuchan is "the worst concessionaire in Cambodia, and the best connected". Global Witness -- currently employed in Cambodia's Forest Crimes Monitoring Unit which is funded by the UK's Department for International Development -- has accused Pheapimex of illegally logging outside their concessions, logging in other firms' concessions, threatening and

attacking forestry officials and logging without the prior approval of the Department of Forestry.

Lao Meng Ken explained to the Phnom Penh Post that he believed Pheapimex's plantation project would not violate the property rights of local people. "I heard that the people complain about cutting of their resin trees. But we're planting in a place that does not violate their rights," he said.

Villagers in Ansa Chombok commune in Pursak province disagree. They are afraid that the plantation will destroy 6,800 hectares of forest near their village. The forest includes an area of lowland pine forest (Pinus merkusii) which is rare in Cambodia and protected by law.

In February this year, villagers travelled to Phnom Penh to try to persuade the government to halt the planned plantation. In March, a meeting between government officials and villagers took place in Ansa Chombok commune. Over 100 villagers from seven villages turned up to the meeting but officials allowed only one representative from each village into the meeting.

During the meeting, the village representatives asked the government officials a series of questions, including: whether the government had approved an environmental impact assessment before signing the contract with Pheapimex; what the likely impact of a pulp and paper mill would be on the Tonle Sap and its fish; and why, when already Cambodia is suffering from rapid deforestation, is the government allowing Pheapimex to destroy more forest. The government officials offered no response.

Oum Huot, a villager from Ansa Chombok told the Phnom Penh Post, "We completely reject the idea that this land is 'degraded forest'. This is good forest and the big trees were cut by loggers only in the last few years. If they leave this land alone for 15 to 20 years big trees will grow again."

"We are worried about this plan," Luek Thuon, another villager from Ansa Chombok, told the Phnom Penh Post. "If they destroy the old forest they might as well come to kill us all. It is our rice pot."

By: Chris Lang