Mr. Hoeun Sopheap
Coordinator of the Prey Lang Community Network

Mr. Hoeun Sopheap, 46 years old, lives in Sandan commune, Sandan district, Kampong Thom province; where he was born. In reaction to deforestation, and due to his passion for the environment, Mr. Sopheap has been participating in activities to protect forests and natural resources since 2006. Given his experience as an activist, Mr. Sopheap was elected as the Coordinator of the Prey Lang Community Network, a self-organised group of local community members who monitors the Prey Lang forest in Kampong Thom, Kratie, Stung Treng, and Preah Vihear provinces. He is currently serving his fourth consecutive two-year term.

Mr. Sopheap said that coordinating the Network is a significant responsibility, as he does not do it for himself but for the interests of the Prey Lang forest. Apart from his work as Coordinator, he also actively takes part in the promotion and protection of human rights, especially when abuses affect grassroots communities: “As human rights defenders, we contribute to resolving problems. For example, when a group of people clears land, and it affects the farmland of citizens, we have the right to advocate for their loss to be compensated if they do not receive anything.” Furthermore, he has engaged in human rights monitoring, and has been collecting incident reports on violations of the rights to freedom of expression and assembly during elections and other gatherings. For Mr. Sopheap, protecting human rights is very important because they are necessary for the lives of people, in addition to being guaranteed by law.

As Coordinator, Mr. Sopheap is concerned about his safety and that of Network members who risk being targeted due to their activism. He mentioned that he and his community were threatened in the past. In one instance, his group was surrounded by the police while they were patrolling the Prey Lang forest. Rangers from Ministry of Environment also prevented community members from patrolling the forest, and authorities disrupted their plans to organize a Prey Lang ceremony.

In addition, a company who received permission to ‘develop’ the Prey Lang area offered Mr. Sopheap money and other advantages to convince him to stop advocating against deforestation; to no avail. His refusal made him worried he might face additional threats. Although he is concerned for his security and safety, Mr. Sopheap is convinced that he is doing the right thing, and that citizens have a duty to protect forests and natural resources, as stated in the Constitution of Cambodia. “Citizens have the right to participate in society, and to protect the territorial integrity, natural resources, and property of nations,” he said.

In order to improve the human rights situation in Cambodia, Mr. Sopheap said the government should comply with its obligation to protect human rights. He also urged citizens to advocate for their rights whenever they are violated, and engage in protecting and promoting human rights for the development of Cambodian society. According to him, human rights defenders must lead the way and play a key role in this process: “As human rights defenders, we must be role models for others when it comes to protecting and promoting human rights.”

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