**Land grabbed by Ly Yong Phat’s Phnom Penh Sugar in Kampong Speu’s Aoral district**

Community members from Peam Ross village stand on their former land, grabbed by Phnom Penh Sugar.

In November 2011, Phnom Penh Sugar (“PPS”) owned by tycoon Ly Yong Phat, grabbed 310.80 hectares belonging to 91 families living in Peam Ross village, Reaskmei Sameakki commune, Aoral district, Kampong Speu province. Many of those families have lived on their land for decades, with the most recent arrivals settling in 2000.

PPS allege that they legitimately bought the land and have documents to prove as much, however the community has never seen such documents and PPS has not clarified from whom they purchased the land. It is important to note here that a month prior to the land grab, local authorities accompanied by the police, announced that all families should inform the cadastral office the location and size of each family’s plot of land. They then requested that the community thumbprint documents and told them this would secure the protection of their land. If they refused, the authorities warned the villagers that they would not be responsible for any loss of land. The villagers have no copies of these documents, but suspect now their thumbprints may have been used to falsify sale of land documents.

In November 2011, PPS’ bulldozers arrived and began clearing the villagers’ farmland, which the villagers relied on to earn an income by cropping rice and collecting forest by-products to sell. Following community protests against the bulldozing, local authorities told the community they would be granted two hectares of replacement land per family. Although in most cases the two hectares was smaller than the families’ original land, they accepted this deal after local authorities told them if they did not, they would be left with nothing.

However, when the villagers were given the replacement land approximately 100m from the village, they soon discovered the land belonged to villagers from another village. The original
owners have threatened the Peam Ros villagers with knives when they have attempted to access the replacement land, and both sides are now at a standoff, as no resolution has been found.

PPS has fenced off the villagers’ original farmland, and cropped sugar there. No compensation has been given. PPS has warned the community if they attempt to access the land they will face criminal charges. The loss of income as a result of the grabbed farmland means that many of the villagers have had to find work as laborers and factory workers in Phnom Penh, where they are forced to endure terrible living conditions, sharing a single room with several people, due to the cost of renting in the capital. Among those who have been forced to seek work in the garment factories regularly working 12-hour days are children as young as 13 years old, who have had their educations interrupted and have been made to work to help their families subsist in the face of the land grabbing.

Additionally, approximately 90 percent of the affected families have taken loans out since the land grab to overcome their financial difficulties, and help pay for medicines and food. The average debts the community members have now accrued is between USD 2,000 and USD 5,000 per family. The villagers accept that taking the loans was a risk, as they are not very confident they can pay them back. When they have not been able to pay the loans back, they have resorted to taking out another loan to pay off the original loans, driving them further into debt.

Since 2014 the community has filed a number of complaints and submitted petitions to several relevant institutions including the district and provincial authorities, the Ministry of Interior, the Prime Minister’s Cabinet, the National Assembly and the Senate. In response, in September 2015 the Ministry of Interior and the National Assembly instructed the provincial authorities to examine the case and resolve it accordingly. No action has been taken as of yet. The community is also waiting to hear back from the European Union (which has purchased sugar from PPS), with whom they filed a complaint in 2015.

The villagers want their original farmland back; they do not trust the authorities to give them replacement land after finding the original replacement land given already belonged to another community. They also want compensation to make up for the earnings lost from their farmland since 2011. They request that NGOs help raise awareness of their case so a resolution can be found quickly.