Land grabbing by high-ranking officials has threatened the Indigenous Bunong community in Choeng village, Kratie province

The Bunong indigenous people have enjoyed living on their land, situated in what is now known as Choeng village in Khsuem commune, Snoul district, Kratie province, since the time of their ancestors. However a number of land grabs perpetrated in recent years and the inability of the community to protect its land have left the community with very little land of their own. The community alleges that powerful and well-connected individuals, including a high-ranking officer, H.E. Leng Orn, have grabbed approximately 3,038 hectares, including spirit forest, relied on by 150 families. Several newcomers have also since come to settle on the land, with some being employed to keep guard over the disputed land and a number of indigenous families have sold their individual plots, effectively leaving them landless. Moreover, the land has been subject to extensive illegal logging. As a result of the land grabs, individual sales and illegal logging, the community have lost their spirit land, their burial land and land reserved for rotation agriculture.

In late 2010, local authorities asked several families to thumbprint documents, under the guise that they were needed so that they could give some money to the poor in the village. The families that signed the documents were each given US$12. It was not until 2016 that the villagers discovered they had been tricked into selling their land; the US$12 was not a charitable gesture but for the purchase of their land.

On 05 November 2011, an employee of H.E. Leng Orn began planting mango trees on the villagers’ land without explaining his actions to the villagers. In response, the villagers filed a letter of complaint with the local authorities. The commune chief told the community not to take the complaint any further as the authorities had already been made aware of the land dispute.

In December 2011, the villagers began to protest against Leng Orn’s employees farming on the affected land, but the workers simply stated that H.E. Leng Orn owned the land. Five or six days later, the representatives of the community travelled to Phnom Penh and filed

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1 As stated in the community complaint, dated 15 June 2016, filed to the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, and other relevant institutions.
complaints with a number of NGOs and Prime Minister Hun Sen’s cabinet. In July 2012, Prime Minister Hun Sen’s cabinet responded to the complaint and sent a letter to the Kratie Provincial Governor, requesting that he investigate the dispute; no further action was taken.

H.E. Leng Orn has since sold much of the land to newcomers with the help of land brokers, making it even more difficult for the villagers to challenge the legality of the initial land grab.

Five community members, who had attempted to protect their fast disappearing land, were arrested and detained on charges of “fraud” (Article 377 of the Criminal Code) in February 2014. This occurred three days after the villagers had filed a complaint against the deputy police inspector, who has deforested and then sold approximately 40 hectares of the community’s forestland. The community members were released on bail four months later, in June 2014. More recently, in November 2015, a family member of a community representative received an anonymous phone call threatening the representative’s arrest. This occurred the day after villagers had submitted a petition to district level authorities requesting the dismissal of the village chief due to his lack of support. Such arrests, and threats of arrest are undoubtedly a cause for concern among community activists, members, and a stark reminder to others who may have otherwise been motivated to advocate for the protection of their land.

The community continues to file complaints to relevant institutions in relation to the land grabbers and have even filed a court complaint in July 2016 against Keo To and Phel Proeun, two of the land grabbers. However, no resolution has been found as of yet. Moreover, since May 2016 the community has begun protesting with renewed vigor against bulldozing and logging occurring at the conflict site.

Each family is left with a mere two to three hectares of residential land but do not possess land titles, and are thus vulnerable to further land grabbing. The community wants their indigenous identity formally recognized by the government. In addition, they desperately want their remaining lands protected under a land title and their traditional lands that were grabbed by H.E Leng Orn and others returned to them. In relation to the loss of their indigenous lands, one community representative observed: “There is no life anymore for the indigenous people... everything is lost.”