Powerful interests have grabbed titled farmland in Krous village, Battambang province

In 1993, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (“UNHCR”) and a Cambodian resettlement and reintegration agency of the United Nations Development Program named CARERE assisted to resettle over 70 Cambodian families living in refugee camps along the Thai border (where the families had fled during the Khmer Rouge regime and civil war) to Krous village, Anlong Run commune, Thma Koul district, Battambang province. With the help from UNHCR and CARERE, the original inhabitants and the resettled families in Krous village were able to obtain land titles, offering them legal protection of their lands, in 1996. Those land titles protected about 140 families’ farmland (a minimum of two hectares per family), located approximately 6km from their housing. The families cropped rice on the farmland, which they relied on as a source of income and food.

In 1997, powerful and well-connected land brokers – including brothers Meuk Ka and Meuk Heng (brothers of Meuk Dara, the former secretary-general of the National Authority for Combatting Drugs), and Mr. Lim Tea Leng, a military official who is the current owner of Thong Hout Transportation Company – accompanied by armed police and military police, attempted to force the families to sell their land titles to them. They told the families they were taking the land either way, so if the families refused to sell, they would end up with nothing. As a result, 83 of the families sold their land titles and relocated elsewhere. The land brokers then posted military police to guard the farmland.

The loss of the farmland and source of income has left the remaining 57 families in a difficult financial situation, and when they have attempted to access their farmland or protest against the land grab, armed police have fired bullets at the ground, in a clear act of intimidation. In 2014, Mr. Lim Tea Leng made to run down community representative Mr. Lun Keila at the conflict site by driving a tractor towards him. Moreover, that same year Mr. Lim Tea Leng brazenly filed a complaint against community representative Mr. Lun Keila, for ‘violating others’ legal property’. Lun Keila was summoned for questioning however the court ended up dismissing the complaint.

The 57 families have filed complaints to the district and provincial authorities, however they received no response. In 2001, they filed a complaint to Prime Minister Hun Sen’s Cabinet, who in response ordered the provincial governor to resolve the conflict. However no action was taken at that time. In 2014, the community filed a complaint to the Ministry of Interior,
who again ordered the provincial governor to examine the case to find a resolution for the community.

In March 2014, the provincial governor promised the community representatives that if they thumbprinted an agreement which stated they would no longer attempt to use the land at the conflict site until a resolution had been found, he would find a resolution for them. The land brokers also signed agreeing also to not use the land, however they have since continued to use the land.

After years of being unable to farm their land, the community wants their land back, and compensation for the years wasted where they were prevented from farming their land. On 5 February 2015, 33 of the 57 affected families filed a complaint to the provincial court against nine land brokers. The remaining families have since migrated elsewhere to find work to overcome their difficult financial situation, or could not afford to join the lawsuit, which is ongoing.