

Pursat - Kralanh Village Profile Draft

In the western province of Pursat, a number of local communities are involved in a long running land dispute with the Pheapimex company, a dispute that has led to anger, protests, and at times, serious violence.



The natural landscape of Pursat is diverse, encompassing highlands and mountains, plains and forests, and forms part of the Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve. According to the government, the province is ideal for investments in agriculture, including rice and industrial crops, fisheries and livestock, hydropower and tourism, among others.¹

Pheapimex is one of Cambodia's most powerful companies and holds some of the largest Economic Land Concessions ("ELCs") in the country. According to Global Witness, as of 2009 the company controlled 7.4 percent of the Cambodia's total land area.² Pheapimex is co-owned by Cambodian Peoples' Party senator Lao Meng Khin and his wife Choeung Sopheap, also known as Yeay Phu, who are reported to have close personal links with Prime Minister Hun Sen and his wife Bun Rany. Lao Meng Khin is also the director of the Shukaku Inc, the company responsible for the infamous real estate development at Boeung Kak Lake in Phnom Penh, which saw the lake filled with sand affecting over 4,000 families, most of whom were forcibly evicted.³

In 2000, Pheapimex was granted two huge ELCs in Pursat and neighboring Kampong Chhnang provinces, covering 138,963 hectares and 176,065 hectares respectively, a total of 315,028 hectares.⁴ According to the Phnom Penh Post, in Pursat alone, as many as 8,200 families have been affected by the concession.⁵ Protests against land seizure by Pheapimex have been ongoing for over a decade, and have sometimes flared into violence.⁶

¹ Council for the Development of Cambodia, Cambodian Investment Board, Cambodian Special Economic Zone Board

² Global Witness, 'Country for Sale: How Cambodia's elite has captured the country's extractive industries,' 2009, p 25, available at:

https://www.globalwitness.org/sites/default/files/import/country_for_sale_high_res_english.pdf

³ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia, Surya P. Subedi, 'A human rights analysis of economic and other land concessions in Cambodia,' 24 September 2012, A/HRC/21/63/Add.1, p 50, available at: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-63-Add1_en.pdf

⁴ Special Representative of the Secretary-General for human rights in Cambodia, Economic land concessions in Cambodia A human rights perspective, 2007, available at: http://cambodia.ohchr.org/WebDOCs/DocReports/2-Thematic-Reports/Thematic_CMB12062007E.pdf

⁵ May Titthara, 'New land titles not recognised: villagers,' Phnom Penh Post, 27 March 2013, available at: <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/new-land-titles-not-recognised-villagers>

⁶ May Titthara, 'Pursat Pheapimex protest,' Phnom Penh Post, 4 April 2012, available at: <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/pursat-pheapimex-protest>

In Kralanh village, 10 families are involved in an ongoing dispute with Pheapimex, as are approximately 36 other families in nearby villages. In February 2015, CCHR met with local villager Mr. Ming Tho in Kralanh village, who explained that farmland belonging to him had been illegally grabbed by the company, despite the fact that he held a formal land title issued by the government, which was presented to CCHR representatives.

Mr. Tho, a farmer and father of three, says he moved to the area in 1993 and occupied five hectares of land, which he cleared himself to plant rice, cassava, mangos and coconuts. Many other families, nine of whom who are also currently in dispute with Pheapimex in Kralanh village over land, also moved to the area in 1993. At that time the Khmer Rouge were still active in the area, so Mr. Tho only came to work on his land during the day, leaving at night as it was too dangerous to stay.

The dispute with Pheapimex in Kralanh village began in 2010, when company bulldozers began clearing farmland and destroying crops, prompting a series of protests by local residents, who also lodged complaints with commune, provincial and district level authorities between 2010 and 2012. In March 2011 the Council of Ministers issued a letter ordering the company to return the land. Despite this, the company retained control over the land.

On 14 June 2012, Prime Minister Hun Sen launched the Heroic Samdech Techo Volunteer Youth land-titling program, also known as Directive One, to be implemented by student volunteers, covering areas where people were living on land without full land titles. In 2012, volunteer students deployed as part of the program visited the area to demarcate the land claimed by the villagers. The students were able to carry out their work without interference, and in December 2012, Mr. Tho and other families received formal land titles confirming their ownership of the land.

Despite the issuing of formal titles, the company and the local authorities including the police, military, Commune Chief, Deputy District Governor and the head of the provincial level land management department have prevented Mr. Tho and several other families from accessing most of their farmland, saying that it belongs to Pheapimex. Mr. Tho also told CCHR that the land title he was issued was only for three hectares, not the five hectares that he had originally occupied.

Mr. Tho says that he has been permitted to farm only one of the three hectares of land recognized in his land title, and that with less land to farm, it has been much more difficult to sustain his livelihood and provide for his family. He says he wants the government to step in and resolve the case, and ensure that all the land belonging to him and other families in his community is returned by the company.

Mr. Tho pleaded, "Please, Prime Minister Hun Sen, intervene to give us all our land back, not just one hectare."