
Phnom Penh, 7 June 2012

I. Introduction

In response to the death of prominent environmental activist Chut Wutty and to the continued plunder of Cambodia’s natural resources, approximately 600 people from communities and villages in 9 provinces throughout Cambodia¹ came together to hold a memorial ceremony for Chut Wutty from May 10 to 13, 2012 in Veal Bei point, located in the Mondul Seima district of Koh Kong province, which is found along the Kravanh mountain range.

The event was organized with two primary objectives: first, to conduct a memorial ceremony to commemorate the death of Chut Wutty, who dedicated his life to environmental protection in Cambodia; and secondly, to observe and patrol the forest in Veal Bei point, where Chut Wutty was fatally shot on 26 April 2012, in order to gather information and document the devastation of natural resources in the area.

II. Background

Chut Wutty, the founder and director of the Natural Resource Protection Group, was fatally shot at approximately 11:00 a.m. on 26 April 2012 in Veal Bei point, where he was documenting illegal logging with two journalists. A military police officer, In Ratana, was also killed around the same time. To this day, the circumstances around both Chut Wutty's and In Ratana's deaths remain unclear. A government-established investigative committee concluded that Rann Borath, a security guard for logging company Timbergreen, unintentionally shot In Ratana while trying to disarm him of an AK-47, which In Ratana had used to kill Chut Wutty. Rann Borath was charged with unintentional murder. The committee further concluded that In Ratana had shot Chut Wutty as a result of a personal dispute and denied that it was a result of military orders.

However, the investigation has been criticized by both national and international civil society organizations. Concerns raised about the investigation have included both the fact that officials changed their version of events since initially claiming that In Ratana had killed himself after shooting Chut Wutty, raising suspicions of government attempts to cover up the story, and the fact that the investigative committee released its conclusions only three days after it was established.

Chut Wutty's death, which has made headlines both nationally and internationally, exemplifies the increasing insecurity faced by human and environmental rights activists in Cambodia. Chut Wutty, like many other human rights defenders and environmental rights activists, had often been subjected to threats to his safety and to his life due to his work, including threats of arrest.

¹ The nine provinces are Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Pursat, Kratie, Stueng Treng, Koh Kong, Siem Reap, Kampong Speu and Kampong Chhnang provinces.
and criminal charges in 2011 as a result of his work on the deforestation of Prey Lang forest, a vast protected forest area in the Northeast of the country.

### III. The Event

Approximately 600 people gathered on May 11, 2012 in Veal Bei point, situated more than 60 kilometers from the provincial town of Koh Kong. As part of the memorial ceremony for Chut Wutty, members of the communities who travelled to Koh Kong, who included Venerable Luon Sovath, marched 100 meters towards the location where Chut Wutty was shot dead, holding incense, carrying a bundle of leaves and branches, topped with a photo of Chut Wutty, which represented the slain activist, and chanting “We Are Chut Wutty.” The community members also carried banners which carried slogans such as: “We will continue Chut Wutty’s actions to crack down on illegal logging. We call on the government to bring the real perpetrators to the Court and to take measures to effectively stop illegal logging for the sake of protecting Cambodian natural resources for the next generations.”

In addition to the march, a number of participants, including community representatives and Chut Wutty’s eldest son Oudom Reaksmy, gave speeches commemorating Chut Wutty’s life and his devotion to his country and to environmental protection, and pledging to continue environmental activism. There was also a Buddhist chanting session, led by Venerable Luon Sovath, to dedicate good deeds to the late Chut Wutty.

After the memorial ceremony was completed, some of the community members entered the forest surrounding the area where Chut Wutty was shot to document illegal logging and to search for evidence that high-quality timber (which is logged for exportation) was being cut down and hidden in a logging factory known to be located in the forest. Although the community members only found a
few piles of logs and four machines used for cutting down trees, they were told by workers and villagers living in the area that a large quantity of luxury timber had already been transported out of the forest prior to their arrival. The community members also found a yellow vine processing facility on Timbergreen’s premises. Yellow vine is used in the production of traditional medicines and is believed to be used as a precursor in the production of steroids.

IV. Challenges & Obstacles
Although the event was a success and achieved its main objectives, the community members who travelled to the area experienced some challenges and obstacles – before, during and after the event – in exercising their fundamental freedoms to expression, assembly and movement. Before the start of the campaign, villagers from Kampong Thom, Kampong Speu, Pursat and Stueng Treng provinces seeking to travel and participate in the memorial ceremony were prohibited by their local authorities from travelling to Koh Kong province. Additionally, some community members reported that they had difficulties in some cases getting gasoline station owners to fill their vehicles in Koh Kong. The station owners claimed that the electricity had been cut off and thus, they couldn’t fill up the tanks – however, it is suspected that they were advised to do so by provincial authorities attempting to restrict travel to the site of Chut Wutty’s killing.

Although the authorities, which included police officers, present during the event did not directly threaten or intimidate community members, it was reported that police officers were taking notes of vehicle license plate numbers of some of the activists giving speeches. Furthermore, some community members received calls during the event from the local authorities in their provinces asking to immediately return to their hometowns.

Finally, after the memorial, some of the people who had participated reported that local authorities in their communities had attempted to identify which villagers had travelled to Koh Kong to participate in the memorial. Community groups from Kampong Chhnang and Pursat provinces were questioned by their local authorities immediately after returning home. This is extremely worrying and raises concerns about future acts of intimidation – whether judicial or extra-judicial – against ordinary people simply on the basis of that fact that they had exercised their fundamental freedoms.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations:
Despite the interruptions and obstructions discussed above, the memorial can be considered to have been successful. The fact that those engaging in patrolling the forest were only able to find a few piles of high-quality timber and a handful of machines used for logging does not indicate that the event was a failure. The event had been announced publicly in advance and there were indications that logged wood had been removed from the area before the arrival of the community members. Most importantly however was the fact that these communities from across the country took the opportunity to pay their respects to Chut Wutty, a tireless environmental activist who had committed his life to protecting Cambodia’s natural resources and communities around the country who rely upon those natural resources for their livelihoods.

Recommendations:
The Cambodian Center for Human Rights makes the following recommendations to the Royal Government of Cambodian following the killing of Chut Wutty on 26 April 2012, and the memorial event of 10-13 May 2012:
• Further investigate the murder of Chut Wutty and ensure that the real perpetrators are brought to justice and release findings to the public.
• Thoroughly investigate deforestation and the depletion of other natural resources in Cambodia and ensure that companies who have been granted economic land concessions are abiding by the contracts signed with the Government.
• Take immediate action to protect the remaining forests in Cambodia, including Prey Lang forest, the largest remaining primary forest in the Southeast Asian peninsula.
• Cooperate and work with civil society organizations and other environmental protection activists in conserving natural resources in Cambodia.
• Ensure that Cambodia adheres to both domestic and international laws regarding human rights protection and promotion, particularly freedom of expression, assembly and movement of the people.