A local activist attempting to deliver a petition to Ban Ki-moon was beaten unconscious and arrested yesterday by police and military police, as the United Nations secretary general concluded his three-day visit to the Kingdom.

Suong Sophorn, 23, was dragged into a police car before being treated at Daun Penh district referral hospital following an incident in which six others were injured.

They were part of a group of roughly 100 people who gathered outside the Cambodian-Russian Friendship Hospital during Ban’s visit to the facility to protest against their impending eviction from the capital’s Boeung Kak lakeside.

“They hit me in the head with a walkie-talkie, punched me in the face several times, hit me with an electric baton and then pulled me into the car by the throat,” Suong Sophorn said yesterday.

He said he was released from custody after signing a pledge to stop leading protests.

Rights groups estimate that more than 4,000 lakeside families will be evicted to make room for a 133-hectare development owned by a ruling party senator.

Daun Penh deputy governor Sok Penhvuth denied that police had used force against the protesters.

“Suong Sophorn pushed the authorities and then hit his head against the police car door,” Sok Penhvuth said. “No one hit or arrested him – the police just helped him get treatment.”
The incident came a day after Prime Minister Hun Sen asked Ban to remove Christophe Peschoux, the longtime country director of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and shut the OHCHR offices in Cambodia.

“What further indication is required that a UN human rights office is needed in Cambodia if the police are willing to beat a young protester unconscious during a visit by the highest-ranking UN official?” said John Coughlan, a legal consultant at the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights.