A TOTAL of 145 people are being detained in prisons across the country after their arrests in connection with land disputes since 2008, according to statistics released yesterday by a local rights group.

“In cases related to land disputes, the courts always make up unlawful, fake charges so they can accuse or arrest villagers without any evidence,” said Ouch Leng, a land programme officer for the local rights group Adhoc, which compiled the statistics.

“When villagers file a complaint against a company that is illegally clearing their land, there is no response from the court, but when a private company or influential official files a complaint, the court will arrest villagers and send them to prison,” he added.

According to figures released by Adhoc yesterday, a total of 218 people have been accused of crimes relating to land disputes so far in 2010, 114 of whom were arrested. Of these, 47 remain in detention.

Ouch Leng also said that 60 of those arrested in 2008, as well as 37 from 2009, remained in prison. He said that he did not know the number of people who had been incarcerated in similar cases prior to 2008.

Meanwhile, Am Sam Ath, a technical supervisor for the rights group Licadho, said that according to data collected by his organisation from 18 prisons across Cambodia, a total of 60 people had been detained or convicted so far this year in land dispute-related cases.

“Land disputes are still a hot issue in Cambodia ... and because we cannot find a definitive resolution, we worry that more villagers will be arrested,” he said.

According to both Adhoc and Licadho, Siem Reap and Kratie were the two provinces with the
Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, said that local authorities and security forces were often complicit in land-grabbing cases that resulted in the arrest of villagers.

“A company will often give a lump sum amount to [local authorities] as a contractual service to resolve the dispute and put a stop to villagers’ demands,” he said.

On numerous occasions companies have used physical violence or destruction of property to intimidate villagers. However, he said, the companies’ owners and employees are almost never charged with crimes.

He cited past cases in which villagers in Oddar Meanchey and Koh Kong provinces were violently evicted on behalf of companies owned by Cambodian People’s Party Senator Ly Yong Phat.

Meanwhile, he said, villagers are frequently – and falsely – charged with destruction of property, incitement of violence or robbery.

John Coughlan, a legal consultant for the CCHR, said the imprisonment of community representatives had two important consequences.

“Firstly, communities are shown the price of activism and are often silenced as a result. Secondly, without their leaders, communities are left disorganised and ... less capable of pursuing their claim to the land,” he said.

Khieu Sopheak, spokesman for the Ministry of Interior, said that police officers were fully justified in carrying out court-ordered arrests.

“If the court did not issue an arrest warrant, our police would not make an arrest,” he said yesterday.

Prum Sithra, a secretary of state at the Ministry of Justice, agreed, saying that villagers were only arrested when they had committed crimes.

“If they did not do something wrong, they would not be arrested," he said.

Nun Pheany, spokeswoman for the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, could not be reached for comment yesterday.