Cambodian police crack down on rally in capital

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Ou Virak (C), president of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, shown here in 2006, expressed shock that Cambodian police beat protesters, including elderly women, and detained 11 people in a crackdown Thursday on a Phnom Penh rally against mass evictions, rights groups said.

The violence erupted after dozens of people gathered outside city hall for the latest in a series of demonstrations against their forced relocation from a lakeside area to make way for a commercial development.

"This is a shocking and entirely unjustifiable response to a peaceful protest," Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, said in a statement.

He told AFP three women lost consciousness and one woman was left with a broken finger after military and anti-riot police attacked the demonstrators with electric batons. Two children were among those detained, he said.

"The arrests of children and beatings of elderly women represent a new low" in the ongoing land dispute in the Cambodian capital, he added.

Phnom Penh police chief Touch Naruth denied that police had used excessive force and said that the two children were not under arrest but "were just following their mothers".

"The protesters cursed police through loud speakers and when we asked them to clear out they threw bricks and bags of urine at us," he told AFP.

He said the nine adult detainees, all women, were unlikely to face charges and might be released on Friday.

Half of the estimated 4,000 families living on the shores of Boeung Kak lake have already moved out, but they received only limited compensation from the Cambodian-Chinese developer headed by a ruling-party politician, according to local housing rights groups.

The remaining residents have held frequent protests in recent months and are refusing to leave unless they get better compensation or a new plot of land nearby. But their protests have fallen on deaf ears.

"Authorities have failed to resolve the increasingly tense situation surrounding the land grab," the Housing Rights Task Force, a non-governmental organisation, said in a statement.

"Instead, they are using delay tactics, empty promises and have repeatedly used violence to disperse the villagers."

Land disputes are a major problem in Cambodia and the government has faced mounting criticism, including from the United Nations and the World Bank, over a spate of forced evictions around the country that have displaced thousands of mostly poor people.

The World Bank admitted last month it had failed to protect the lake residents when it was working on a land titling project in the country a few years ago and has repeatedly called on the government to end the evictions.

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The bank's country manager Qimiao Fan reiterated concerns about land conflicts at a meeting between the government and foreign donors on Wednesday, using the Boeung Kak lake case as an example.

Ou Virak said the fact that the crackdown happened just one day after donors discussed the issue showed that the government was becoming increasingly "authoritarian".

"It's not just that they are allowing land-grabbing, they are also silencing any kind of protest," he said.

Cambodia has come under fire from rights groups and observers in recent months for stifling free speech and cracking down on opponents after it introduced laws that increase the risk of arrest for voicing dissent.

It is also in the midst of drafting a controversial law that critics say would restrict the activities of campaigners and charity workers.

Holding demonstrations in most of the capital has also become more difficult since the opening of a designated protest park last year that rights groups argue is designed to keep protesters out of sight.

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