Police beat and arrested villagers including elderly women and children as young as 11 yesterday as they protested their impending eviction from land surrounding the capital’s Boeung Kak lake, an incident observers called a “new low” in the lakeside debacle.

The violence came one day after a meeting with government officials in which donors flagged land rights and resettlement as among the Kingdom’s biggest development challenges.

About 100 villagers gathered yesterday morning in front of City Hall, calling for a moratorium on the filling of the lake and new talks on resettlement and compensation plans. More than 100 local and military police subsequently surrounded the gathering as the villagers blocked Monivong Boulevard in Daun Penh district.

Municipal Cabinet chief Koet Chhe and Daun Penh district governor Sok Sambath later appeared, urging the villagers to return home and rejected their requests for talks.

When the crowd refused to disperse, police dragged several villagers into a police van while beating others with electric batons.

“Police with shields and electric batons attacked us weak and unarmed women,” said Nhet Khun, 71, who was bleeding from the head following the protest.

“We do not know what to think, because the government does not help us and instead uses force to attack us.”
Among the 11 people arrested yesterday were two boys – Lim Sothearith, 11, and Hong Virakyuth, 12 – who clung to their mothers as they were dragged into the police van.

Phnom Penh Municipal Police Chief Touch Naruth said the group remained in custody at the city police station in Russei Keo district yesterday evening.

“The villagers who were arrested were told to sign a contract promising to stop protests that cause public disorder, and to stop using violence and arguing with the police,” he said, adding that the 11 would likely be released today. “We arrested them just to educate them. We will not bring them to court.”

Touch Naruth claimed villagers had thrown water bottles and stones at police yesterday, though villagers said they had only thrown water.

Rights groups say over 4,000 families, or roughly 20,000 people, will ultimately be displaced by the 133-hectare real estate development at Boeung Kak, a joint venture project between a Chinese firm and a company owned by ruling party senator Lao Meng Khin. Over 2,000 families have already left, despite persistent complaints about the meagre compensation options presented by the city and the developer.

Residents have been offered on-site relocation, the plans for which have yet to materialise, housing in Dangkor district and two million riel (US$495), or cash payments of $8,500, far below the market value of many homes in the community.

At least 10 villagers were injured during yesterday’s violence, including community representative Tep Vanny, who broke her thumb as she was being arrested when it was caught in the door of a police van.

Police later allowed an official from the United Nations human rights office to take her to receive medical treatment before returning her to custody.

Heng Mom, 54, said the police had been “cruel” and had treated the protesters “like criminals”.

“At about five police officers beat and kicked me and tried to push me into their car,” she said, adding that she had been able to break free and avoid arrest.

At a meeting between donors and government officials in Phnom Penh on Wednesday, World Bank country manager Qimiao Fan cited the Boeung Kak dispute as an example of the weak land tenure security and unclear resettlement policies that plague the Kingdom.

“With rapid urbanisation, the resumption of fast economic growth and the increasing interest from investors in large-scale commercial farming, land issues will become only more challenging, as exemplified in the Boeung Kak Lake area,” he said.

The World Bank acknowledged last month, following an internal investigation, that a land titling programme it conducted in cooperation with the government from 2002 to 2009 had failed to
Lake protest turns bloody
Written by Khouth Sophak Chakrya
Friday, 22 April 2011 15:03

offer titles at the lakeside, despite the legitimate claims of residents.

Since the Boeung Kak development was approved in 2007, lakeside villagers have staged numerous rallies in the city and have clashed with police on many occasions. Cambodian Centre for Human Rights president Ou Virak said yesterday’s violence, however, was “a new low” in the long-running saga.

“This is a shocking and entirely unjustifiable response to a peaceful protest by the disenfranchised lake residents,” he said in a statement yesterday. “The actions of the authorities today illustrate that the rights to freedom of assembly and expression of ordinary Cambodians [are] secondary to the business operations of the wealthy and well-connected.”

Housing Rights Task Force, meanwhile, called for an investigation of the violence and urged the government to “cease its intimidation campaign and begin an honest dialogue with the Boeung Kak lake residents”.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY JAMES O’TOOLE