

In Cambodia Urban Renewal Takes A Nasty Twist

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The government is using the fiction of slum clearance to grab land from the poor

Just a stone's throw away from Cambodia's National Assembly in Phnom Penh, a fading billboard trumpets an urban renewal campaign promising to transform 100 poor communities into thriving neighborhoods within a year. Included is the decimated slum that lies behind the billboard – Dey Krahorm, or Red Earth village.

The billboard, erected a few months before national elections four years ago, shows Prime Minister Hun Sen leading a band of impassioned officials as they stride toward this much publicized goal.

They never reached it. After the election, urban renewal turned into poverty expulsion. Red Earth now resembles a one of Beirut's least lucky neighborhoods, a landscape of rubble, teetering shacks and evacuated spaces. Fewer than 100 of the nearly 1,000 families who lived there when the billboard was erected remain. The rest have been trucked off to one of the many relocation sites 20 to 30 kilometers outside the city, most of which lack electricity, clean water, toilets, schools, clinics and, importantly, access to jobs.

Excluding Burma, *"Cambodia has the most abusive record of forced evictions in the region,"* said David Pred, the country director an international NGO called Bridges Across Borders.

In an interesting twist, the Cambodian Red Cross, which has been appealing for donations to resettle squatters, is headed by the prime minister's wife, Bun Rany Hun Sen. Besides widespread allegations of corruption and misuse of funds, the Cambodia Red Cross's appeal for funds to resettle people evicted as a result of land grabs by people closely tied to the prime minister is, to use the phrase of one diplomat, "more than a little off-putting."

An official at the International Red Cross agreed: *"There's something not quite kosher about this,"* he said.

Although evictions have been a companion to Asia's "asymmetrical growth", over the past 25 years, the situation in Cambodia is exacerbated by the lack of legal protection for those facing eviction, Pred explains. *"At least in a country like the Philippines, affected people can go to court and have some chance at stopping [evictions] or getting fair compensation. That is not possible in Cambodia today,"* Pred said.

Dey Krahorm resident Lee Luleng was blunter: *"If I call the police [for help] they will arrest me."* Lee Luleng, 61, is among those who have declined the offer of either relocation outside the city or compensation equivalent to less than 10 percent of the land's market value of more than US\$3,000 per square meter from 7NG, the shadowy company that claims ownership of the land. (7NG describes itself as a publicly listed company in a country that does not have a stock exchange. In a telephone interview, 7NG chairman Srey Sothea said the company is not listed on a foreign bourse

and that all its funds are sourced in Cambodia. He declined, however, to identify the exact source of the company's funds or name its board of directors. He did say, however, that 7NG is "seeking foreign investment.")

Declining a bad deal from 7NG can come at a heavy price. At least 13 residents of Dev Krathorn, including six community representatives, have been charged with criminal offenses, according to the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, which has documented a three-year campaign of what it calls "harassment, intimidation and provocation" against the community by private security officers and municipal police.

"They shout, 'Get out, dogs!' We shout back, 'You're worse than Pol Pot,'" is how Lee Luleng described the frequent standoffs with police and security officers. Along with insults and obscenities, police sometimes toss bags of urine at them, residents say. Police erected a wall along one end of the community to block access to street-side shops (forcing owners to sell or relocate) and tried unsuccessfully to block access to the market that is the community's main source of income.

Srey Sothea, the 7NG head, said no employees of his company were involved in altercations with residents of Dey Krathorn. *"We're a construction company, not a security firm,"* he said. He also denied allegations that 7NG is paying police officers to drive the residents from their homes.

"When Cambodians hear the phrase 'development plan', they know it means evictions," explained Choun Chamrong, a land-rights program officer at the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Organization. *"Usually they give up quickly because they know they are up against companies or individuals connected to the government,"* she explained. In 2006, Adhoc recorded 16 cases of entire communities being forcibly evicted. Last year, the figure rose to 26.

Brittis Edman, a researcher with Amnesty International, pointed to another disquieting trend. *"What we are seeing over the last year is that the courts are increasingly being used as tools to silence housing rights activists,"* she said before the February release of AI's report "Rights Razed: Forced Evictions in Cambodia." The report warned that "at least 150,000" Cambodians are at risk of forced evictions.

The government's response was unintentionally amusing. It insisted there were no forced evictions in Cambodia and accused Amnesty International of trying to grab headlines. Interior Ministry spokesman Khieu Sopheak went further. He told reporters that if the government did not respect human rights, it would have expelled Amnesty's representatives from Cambodia.

What he failed to mention, however, was that police tried to stop Edman from meeting a group of residents facing eviction near Phnom Penh's Boeung Kak Lake on February 10. *"They told us we didn't have a permit to hold the meeting, but we explained we were just having a discussion,"* Edman said. After a brief face-off, police allowed the discussion to proceed, but they photographed every resident, journalist and activist present, and tape-recorded the meeting.

In another village, residents say they are crammed together now in a ditch with no access to clean water and no source of income. The impact of forced evictions on public health has yet to be measured – at either the local, provincial or national levels – but NGOs working with communities that have been evicted are scrambling to find funds to expand their medical outreach programs. Illnesses include malnutrition, weakened immune systems, bronchitis and other lung infections, skin rashes, ear and eye infections, diarrhea, fever, intestinal worms, fungal infections, and post-traumatic stress.

Andong, a resettlement site where the evicted have been moved to about 20 kilometers from Phnom Penh, is a public-health disaster. The lack of sanitation, clean water and access to health care leaves

the 1,500 families crammed into what has been called a “fetid swamp” highly vulnerable to any outbreak of infectious disease, health workers warn.

Five children died of dengue fever there in March last year alone, resident Kat Vijay recalls. Like most of residents of the site, Kat was evicted from Sambok Chap, a settlement along the banks of the Bassac River in Phnom Penh in June 2006.

Resident Sum Khum says living in Andong is worse than the refugee camp in which she spent 13 years on the Thai border. *“Then, we had food and water. We had medicine and schools. Aid workers used to visit us,”* said the 74-year-old widow. *“Now, we have nothing. Sometimes the Christians come with rice and noodles, but they don’t bring enough.”*

After almost two years, the evictees are still waiting for running water, electricity, a sewage system, a clinic, a school, and toilets that work. The 12 that were installed last year, along with 12 bathing stalls, can’t be used because they are not connected to running water.

When he lived in Phnom Penh, Kat Vijay worked in construction, mainly restoring the city’s French colonial mansions, for US\$2.50 a day. Since then he has had no work except for a three-month stint building a row of 41 rooms at Andong for the Cambodian Red Cross, he says.

Brittis Edman of Amnesty International noted a new development in forced evictions that many diplomats may find even more off-putting. Some residents at resettlement sites are being threatened with eviction again, possibly to make more room for newcomers, she said.

P.S.

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