

Calls grow for investigation over missing Cambodian land activist

Friday 5 April 2019, by [NACHEMSON Andrew](#), [SINEAT Yon](#) (Date first published: 29 March 2019).

Human rights groups ratchet up pressure on the Cambodian government after Sum Moeun vanished without a trace.

Phnom Penh, Cambodia - Two months ago, Sum Moeun was last seen being beaten up by Cambodian soldiers following his arrest over an ongoing land dispute with an agro-industrial company.

Moeun and his fellow villagers have been in conflict with the Metrei Pheap company, which was granted 8,520 hectares of land within the Kulen Wildlife Sanctuary in 2012. The villagers argue the concession includes their own farmland, and 15 community members were arrested during a crackdown in January.

Fourteen people, including Moeun's son Moeun Mean, remain in custody, facing up to 10 years in prison, while Moeun himself has disappeared without a trace.

[Human rights](#) groups have increased pressure on the Cambodian government with both [Human Rights Watch](#) and Licadho releasing statements demanding that Moeun be presented. The [United Nations](#) is also investigating the issue.

"Cambodian authorities should immediately reveal the whereabouts of a land activist forcibly disappeared in Preah Vihear province," said the HRW press release.

Moeun and his son were arrested by Cambodian soldiers who had been hired by Metrei Pheap for security.

"Witnesses reported that Moeun was beaten following his arrest," reads the Licadho statement.

Moeun's wife, Phu Phim Mao, said her son corroborated accounts that her husband was beaten while in custody.

"I've met my son four times in the prison," she said. "He witnessed that the soldiers kicked and pushed my husband to the sand and his eye and face were covered with blood."

No 'credible evidence'

According to their son, Moeun was beaten for asking the soldiers to present arrest warrants.

"The soldiers got so mad at him so they started to beat him up and responded to my husband that they have authorisation from the court," Phim Mao said.

Phim Mao said the villagers were not informed of the arrests until the next day, and by then Moeun had reportedly escaped.

Officials claimed Moeun escaped from the wildlife sanctuary office where he was being detained, but no arrest warrant was issued as it is expected in a fugitive case. Licadho questioned other discrepancies in the official story, noting “authorities have failed to provide any credible evidence about Moeun’s location, claiming at different times that he was hiding at an undisclosed location in Phnom Penh or receiving medical treatment in the capital”.

Different officials also gave Phim Mao different stories.

“Some military police told me he was detained in the prison, but it was not the right time to let me visit him,” she said.

“I don’t know the situation of my husband if he’s still alive or detained or something, I don’t know,” she said.

Phim Mao also said officials impounded and later returned the family truck, but she has not recovered the cash or valuable necklace that was on Moeun’s person when he was detained.

“The Cambodian government needs to produce Sum Moeun in court and lawfully charge him or return him home to his family,” said Brad Adams, Asia director of HRW in a statement. He went on to call for an “immediate, independent investigation”.

“His family has good reason to fear for his safety,” Adams added.

‘Fewer accountability mechanisms’

Ear Sophal, a Cambodian-American associate professor of World Affairs and Diplomacy at Occidental College, said there appears to have been an uptick of violence in recent land dispute cases.

“These things are hard to measure, especially given that independent reporting is increasingly tenuous,” Sophal explained.

In the past two years, [Cambodia](#)’s free press was obliterated and the main political opposition party was forcibly dissolved. In this context, Sophal said there are “fewer accountability mechanisms” to hold the government in check.

At the same time, Prime Minister Hun Sen’s rhetoric has become increasingly violent, frequently saying he will “kill” the opposition and once openly threatening to attack them with grenade launchers.

In 2018, soldiers moonlighting as illegal loggers murdered three forestry defenders. Later that year, at least two land dispute protesters were shot in Kratie. In January of this year, police shot another land dispute protester in Sihanoukville, while other villagers were beaten up.

“Even if there’s no actual memo from the top, it’s clear inspiration is being taken from the new normal which has made the indefensible defensible,” Sophal said, adding the situation has “further emboldened anyone with authority to pull the trigger”.

Land disputes have been a chronic issue plaguing Cambodia since the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge abolished private property in the 1970s. Following the regime’s collapse, most Cambodians simply settled in rural areas without any proper documentation, leaving the notoriously corrupt government free to lease inhabited land to powerful politicians, businessmen and corporations.

Phim Mao said authorities came in 2017 to measure out the land that belongs to the Metrei Pheap

company, but only measured a small amount because it was the rainy season. She said they never returned to complete the measurements and simply began arresting villagers for growing crops on land claimed by the company.

Obligation to investigate

Moeun's disappearance comes while Cambodia is under intense scrutiny from the international community, with the European Union beginning a process to revoke its preferential trade deal over recent human rights abuses.

The Cambodian Centre for Human Rights also joined the chorus of voices calling for government action, telling Al Jazeera that as a signatory to the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the Cambodian government has an obligation to investigate.

"The state must take appropriate measures to investigate cases of enforced disappearance and bring those responsible to justice," said CCHR director Chak Sopheap. "It is the duty of the state to fully investigate the disappearance of Sum Moeun, or to reveal his whereabouts if they are known."

Chum Socheat, a spokesman for the Ministry of Defence, declined to comment on whether such an investigation is under way. Preah Vihear Provincial Governor Un Chanda did not reply to repeated requests for comment, but told the Phnom Penh Post that Moeun is not in custody.

"His wife is helping to hide him," he reportedly said, saying Moeun won't come forward out of fear of arrest.

Meanwhile, Phim Mao has found herself in dire straits financially, claiming the company destroyed their crop yield forcing her to sell her house to begin to pay off her debt.

"I'm now not only missing my husband but I also lost my house and am not able to pay back my loan, as well my four kids need money for their studies and I can't afford this," she said.

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P.S.

Al Jazeera, March 29, 2019

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