Carving Up Cambodia
One concession at a time
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   One concession at a time

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In the race to exploit Cambodia’s land and forests, new maps reveal the rapid spread of plantations and mining across the nation.

Workers prepare to build new homes for residents being displaced by land sales, in Botum Sakor National Park in Koh Kong province on February 20.
sub-decrees obtained by The Daily, while an-
other 40,000 hectares have been allocated so far this year. One of the hardest hit conservation ar-
Since 2010, according to sub-decrees ob-
As the companies moved rapidly to cut down
the dense core of Boeng Per, the impact on forests, wildlife and local communities has been dramatic.

Mr. Davis said the concessions were the
death knell for Boeng Per, a lowland evergreen forest which had abundant wildlife such as the Asian elephant, pileated... it began a slow decline as log-gers first targeted luxury wood species such as rosewood and made inroads into the forest.

Mr. Davis said that despite grabbing hun-
dreds of thousand of hectares of farmland.

The government, he said, has been complicit in the land grabbing. “The government already knows that when they grant a concession that it overlaps with the people’s land, so the prob-

Rupert Abbott, Amnesty International’s re-
search officer on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, said the new surge in granted concessions would further worsen “land conflict and forced evic-
tions, which ... are already creating an environ-
ment of desperation and alienation, and leading to social instability in Cambodia.”

A trend among the new concessions is that they are increasingly being given to prote-
gected forest areas, causing deforestation rates to soar. The Ministry of Environment recent-
ly opened up its 23 national parks and wildlife sanctuaries to investment firms, giving away about 346,000 hectare in 13 conservation ar-
eas—at 10.3 percent of the total area to rubber planta-
tions, Licadho data shows. Much of it is located in pristine forest areas.

About 253,000 hectares of these conces-
sions were granted in 2011 alone, according to sub-decrees obtained by The Daily, while an-
other 40,000 hectares have been allocated so far this year.

Mr. Y eap said that where negative impacts
did occur, there is still a positive net effect. “The impact [of concessions] is just so lit-
tle compared to the ... should understand that they should sacrifice for the nation in order to help government in reducing people's poverty .”

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hectares have been granted as mining and economic land concessions, covering 22 percent of Cambodia’s surface area, which totals 17,650,913 hectares according to the CIA World Fact Book.

1,900,311 hectares have been granted as mining concessions to companies exploring for precious minerals such as gold, iron ore, copper and bauxite.

2,036,170 hectares have been granted as land concessions for agro-industrial plantations for crops such as rubber, sugar and cassava, an area equivalent to 53 percent of Cambodia’s arable land, which covers 3,607,847 hectares according to the CIA World Fact Book.

346,000 hectares of land concessions are located inside conservation areas administered by the Ministry of Environment. This area represents about 10 percent of protected areas under the ministry’s control.

400,000 people have been affected by land disputes in 12 provinces since 2003, according to Licadho, mostly after concessions were granted in their area.

335,142 combined hectares owned by CPP Senator Lao Meng Khin as part of three projects, including his 315,000-hectare Pheapimex concession in Pursat province and Boeng Kak lake development project in Phnom Penh, representing 16 percent of all land concessions nationwide.

100,000 hectares comprise CPP Senator Mong Reththy’s Green Sea concession in Stung Treng province, representing about 5 percent of all land concessions nationwide.

86,000 hectares controlled by CPP Senator Ly Yong Phat, whose 10 sugar and rubber plantations and an economic zone account for about 4.3 percent of land concessions nationwide.

41,000 hectares comprise An Marady’s projects, while Try Pheap controls about 36,000 hectares. Together the tycoons control about 4 percent of all land concessions nationwide.
as workers cleared trees. It is a hotpot for gibbons,” Mr. Davis added.

Company workers had told him they were clearing forest at the staggering rate of 500 hectares per month, he said, adding that workers also trapped animals escaping from the area being logged in order to gain extra income. Valuable timber such as resin trees—which are a traditional source of income for local villagers, many of who are indigenous minority Kuy—were being logged in the tens of thousands and immediately cut at a local saw mill, where a cubic meter of this tropical hardwood was being sold for about $150, according to Mr. Davis.

Local indigenous minority Kuy villagers, who declined to be named because they feared retribution by local authorities, said villagers in Preah Vihear’s Borneo commune were suffering from the destruction of Boeng P'or.

“Since we have lost the resin trees and forest, we feel we have lost everything in our life. People are unhappy with the small amount of compensation provided by the company,” he said.

“We definitely are losing our traditional Kuy culture and livelihoods,” he said. “Spirit forests are facing threats of being cleared by the concession companies soon.”

There is a legal limit of 10,000 hectares per economic land concession, according to a 2005 law. Concessions granted before the law was passed can be bigger. Some new concessionaires have found a way around the limit by planning concessions next to each other, like the Vietnamese owners of the four Pacific Joint Stock companies have done in Mondolkiri’s Koh Nhek district.

Mr. Marady and Mr. Pheap could not be reached for comment.

Such losses of protected forest, endangered wildlife and traditional livelihoods are now taking place across the country, as many concessions cut deeper into numerous parks under the Environment Ministry’s control as can be seen on Licadho’s map (see page 8).

In the 150,000-hectare Botum Sakor National Park in Koh Kong province about 56 percent of the area was granted recently to CPP senator and businessman Lyong Phat and the Chinese Tianjin United Development Group (UDG), which is developing a billion-dollar holiday resort that includes hotels, golf courses, a casino, an airport and a port located along the Gulf of Thailand.

About 1,200 families from coastal fishing villages were forcibly evicted to make way for the 4,000-hectare UDG project last year, receiving some financial compensation and homes on poor quality land far away from the coast.

In the 200,000-hectare Vachon National Park in Ratankiri province, concessionaires Mr. Pheap and Mr. Marady are again at work, as they are among a group of companies that received rights to clear 16 percent of the park—mostly pristine hillside forests along the eastern border with Vietnam—ostensibly to replant it with rubber.

Mr. Marady and Mr. Pheap could not be reached for comment.

Mr. Pheap is meanwhile maintaining good relations with authorities after building a new office for the local CPP branch and the Boeng Peang Rangers, and giving them motorcycles and photographic cameras to monitor, of all things, illegal logging, local officials said in September.

Mr. Marady and Mr. Pheap could not be reached for comment.

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Mr. Vudtha acknowledged that there had been a legal increase in the number of concessions in protected areas, but said he did not know how much the total area was.

There is nothing to be concerned about at all regarding the loss of pristine and core forests,” he said.

But environmental groups such as World Wildlife Fund said they are “extremely concerned” over the location of these concessions and the fact that the parks seemed to have no designated protected core zones that are off limits to agricultural development.

“Since the 1990s, high-ranking people have said ‘We can create jobs for you [through concessions].’ This policy of favoring big companies has turned our people from landowners to a landless working class,” he said.

Although popular resentment against these social impacts is growing, Mr. Mong Hay believed it had not yet reached a tipping point.

“The suffering of these land-grabbing victims has not yet received widespread sympathy of other people.”

Foreign donors have so far largely refrained from directly criticizing the Cambodian government over its land rights record. But this may be changing. Last year, the World Bank suspended its projects in Cambodia after the government ignored the land rights of 4,000 embattled Boeng Kak lake families in Phnom Penh under a land-titling program funded by the Bank.

Jacob Jepsen, counselor and deputy head of representation at the Danish Embassy, which supports the government on forestry issues, said the recent surge in concessions and their haphazard allocation in protected forests and on village farmlands had worried many in the donor community.

“There’s concern about the way it’s done, the lack of environmental impact assessments, the lack of information, the whole process,” he said. “Every day in the donor community we see clashes between communities and concession holders—that’s due to a lack of planning, it all seems very much ad hoc.”

Mr. Jepsen said the embassy was “extremely concerned” over the effect of concessions on the land rights situation in Cambodia. “This type of development is not useful for the country,” he said. “If we have recognition of land rights of communities things would be much, much better.”