



Companies, People, Ideas

Land Grabs Growing in Cambodia

Ron Gluckman 11.24.08

Dotted with palm trees and quaint bungalows, Cambodia's coast is a reminder of how blissful Southeast Asia's beaches used to look, before a tourist boom brought millions of sun-seekers from around the globe. But behind the palm trees a battle rages.

Mass evictions have scarred Cambodia for years. One of the most vicious came last year in the coastal town of Sihanoukville, where 150 police and military forced out more than 100 families and destroyed their dwellings. The villagers were left on the side of a dirt road and 18 months later remain there. "Land grabs are reaching epidemic proportions," says David Pred, founder and director of Bridges Across Borders Southeast Asia, an aide group that has been an advocate of land rights. "This is the biggest problem facing Cambodia today."

Cambodia has one of the world's worst rates of landlessness, and the problem is growing. The U.S. Agency for International Development estimated that in 1999, 12% of Cambodians had no home or title to land. The figure has nearly doubled to 23% now, according to Pred.

Land is regularly handed out in large, illegal concessions to real estate developers, with little or no compensation for the residents, alleges Naly Pilorge, director of the human rights group Licadho. In Phnom Penh huge tracts have been promised to Korean and Taiwanese firms, which plan enormous satellite cities. Practically all of the land along the coast and offshore islands has been leased in recent years, largely by foreign firms planning resorts, casinos and villa developments.

Sometimes entire villages are knocked down in the name of progress, and profit. Residents are shunted to distant sites lacking electricity, water or services, says Pred. Licadho has documented numerous cases where residents were rounded up by the military and simply dumped elsewhere. Amnesty International estimates that more than 150,000 people across the country live at risk of forced eviction, and rarely for the public good, as is often the rationale for evictions elsewhere. Corruption is rampant. Transparency International recently dropped Cambodia a few more notches to rank it as the most corrupt country in Asia, just below Myanmar.

Like most developing countries, Cambodia does a terrible job of protecting property rights by giving people title to their land and having the courts back that up. And the government is not interested in talking about it. Sok Chenda, the secretary general of the Council for the Development of Cambodia, did not respond to e-mails and telephone calls asking for comment on the issue of forced evictions. Finally he was reached on his private line but refused to meet with a FORBES ASIA correspondent.

Many fear more evictions as the coast is carved up for villas. "Development is supposed to help people," says Pred, "not make them worse."