

Logging in South-East Asia

Rubber barons

The destruction of forests continues

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ALONG
Route 7 in
Cambodia's
remote
north,
dozens of
small
tractors



Their days were numbered

known as “iron buffaloes” are plying a dilapidated piece of highway. Under cover of darkness, they transport freshly cut timber into nearby sawmills. The drivers wear masks, their tractors fitted with just one dim lamp at the front. Each carries between three and six logs which locals say were felled illegally on or near the Dong Nai rubber plantation, owned by Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG).

Illegal logging and land-grabbing have long been problems in Cambodia. A new report entitled “Rubber Barons” by Global Witness, a London-based environmental watchdog, has highlighted the issue once again. Dong Nai features prominently in the report, which claims that luxury timbers like rosewood, much in demand for furniture in China and guitars in the West, were culled as a 3,000-hectare (7,400-acre) section of forest was illegally cleared.

Global Witness says that local and foreign companies have amassed more than 3.7m hectares of land in Cambodia and Laos since 2000, as governments have handed out huge land concessions, many in opaque circumstances. Two-fifths of this was for rubber plantations, dominated by state companies from Vietnam, the world's third-largest rubber producer.

The report claims that VRG and another Vietnamese company, HAGL, are among the biggest land-grabbers, and have been logging illegally in both Cambodia and Laos. It says that, through Vietnam-based funds, the two companies have received money from Deutsche Bank, while HAGL also has investment from the IFC, the private-sector arm of the World Bank. The two Vietnamese companies have denied any wrongdoing. Deutsche Bank and the IFC say they are studying the findings.

The report says that the two companies have failed to consult local communities or pay them compensation for land they formerly used. The companies routinely use armed security forces to guard plantations. Large areas of supposedly protected intact forest have been cleared, in violation of forest-protection laws and “apparently in collusion with Cambodia’s corrupt elite”.

Global Witness is urging authorities in Cambodia and Laos to revoke the two companies’ land concessions, which cover 200,000 hectares and are held through a network of subsidiaries. It thinks both companies should be prosecuted.

Kut Mau, a 23-year-old father of five, says his complaints against the Vietnamese operators of Dong Nai prompted a visit from a special unit of youth volunteers, who are part of an attempt by Hun Sen, Cambodia’s prime minister, to resolve the ongoing disputes.

With an election due in late July, last year Mr Hun Sen announced a moratorium on granting further land concessions, attempted to return some land to local people, and deployed thousands of such volunteers. Thirty years of war, including 18 years of communism, and a displaced population have rendered land titling in Cambodia merely vestigial.

Mr Kut Mau says he had been granted two hectares under the restitution programme. “I was lucky,” he says. “Hundreds of families got nothing and have left.” The few villagers living inside the perimeter of Dong Nai, 20km (12.5 miles) from the small town of O Preas, confirmed the tale. At one cluster of shacks, members of three families admitted they were farming illegally.

Iem Somean, a 27-year-old mother of seven, is one of them. She says the families lost access to communal land needed for water, crops and grazing, and are now just hoping they are not noticed. “If we aren’t allowed to stay then I will die,” she says. “How else can I support the family?”

Mr Kut Mau says he is waiting for a government letter to confirm ownership of his two hectares but he does not expect to receive this until after the election. Mr Hun Sen warns that land allocations among the villages will not be completed unless he is re-elected. Mr Kut Mau says that if he does not receive his letter then he might have to buy himself an iron buffalo.

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