

Bridges Across Borders * Housing Rights Task Force * Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions

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Cambodian and international human rights organisations call for charges to be dropped in Sihanoukville evictions case: Trial of villagers accused of assaulting police begins tomorrow

The Cambodian Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF), Bridges Across Borders (BAB) and The Geneva-based Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), today call on the Prosecutor to immediately drop the charges against 13 villagers from Mittapheap 4 village, Sihanoukville. The villagers, who have been accused of assaulting police while defending their houses during a violent forced eviction in April this year, go on trial on Tuesday, in Sihanoukville. The coalition of international and national organizations also calls on the Cambodian Prime Minister, Samdech Hun Sen, to set up an independent inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the eviction.

More than 100 villagers were evicted from Mittapheap 4 village, Sihanoukville despite the fact that many have lived on the land for years in peace and tranquillity. Mrs. Peng Ravy, the wife of an advisor to a senior government official, had claimed the land publicly since 2006. Despite the fact that Mrs. Ravy has never presented any title deeds proving her ownership, or been found by a court to be the owner of land, district authorities issued an eviction notice on 26 October 2006 – in direct contravention of the 2001 Cambodian land law.

The eviction was carried out on 20 April 2007, by Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF), military police and police. Villagers and human rights monitors reported that government forces arrived with three police trucks, an excavator and two water trucks filled with a mixture of water and gasoline. They fired their guns at the ground and above the heads of the villagers, and proceeded to attack, destroy and loot the homes and belongings of the villagers. Villagers in desperation tried to stop the eviction. In the resulting chaos, five women were injured and thirteen men were badly hurt, many of them knocked unconscious. Two police officers were also injured in the struggle.

The thirteen wounded men were arrested and taken to prison. The police and military confiscated numerous valuables from the villagers, including sixteen motorbikes. They then proceeded to loot and burn down their homes, along with clothes and other items. Eighty houses were burned to the ground and 26 houses were demolished. Photographs taken by a villager strongly corroborate their account of events.

“The violence that took place at Spean Ches between villagers and the authorities was precipitated by the violent and unlawful forced removal of the village residents from their land and the looting and destruction of their homes and property by the military and police,” said Bridges Across Borders Country Director David Pred, on behalf of the Housing Rights Task Force. “This forced eviction took place without any semblance of legal authority and represents a gross and criminal violation of human rights.”

Jean du Plessis, the Acting Executive Director of COHRE, said: “We are extremely concerned about the violent and arbitrary nature of the evictions carried out in Sihanoukville in April this year. It seems clear from the reports we have seen that the eviction did not comply either with international human rights standards, or with Cambodian law. We call on the Prime Minister, Samdech Hun Sen, to immediately launch an independent inquiry into the actions of the security forces in undertaking this eviction, and into possible land-grabbing in this case.”

Phann Sithan, of the Housing Rights Task Force, said “We call on the Government to immediately drop the charges against the 13 villagers, who were doing nothing more than defending their houses and families from violent attack. Along with their fellow villagers, they should be allowed to return to their land, pending the resolution of this land dispute by an independent court, in accordance with the law of Cambodia and international human rights law standards. We further call on the government to return all property confiscated during the eviction, and to provide adequate compensation for all property destroyed.”

Mr Du Plessis continued: “Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Cambodia is a party, the Government of Cambodia is obliged to protect the housing rights of all Cambodians. Evictions should only be carried out in highly exceptional circumstances, should not be carried out violently, and should not render people homeless. Evictions should not be carried out arbitrarily, without genuine consultation with the affected community, or without considering alternatives, particularly when a dispute over land has not been resolved by an independent tribunal. These standards were clearly not met in this case.”

A delegation of international and Cambodian human rights experts from COHRE and the Housing Rights Task Force will observe the trial on Tuesday 3 July.

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The Housing Rights Taskforce (HRTF) is a coalition of more than 20 Cambodian and International organisations committed to the right to adequate housing and against forced evictions.

The Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) is an international human rights organisation based in Geneva, Switzerland that promotes the right to adequate housing and works to prevent forced evictions. COHRE has Special Consultative Status with the United Nations.

Bridges Across Borders is an international organization working to strengthen relationships between the world's people's through cooperation on poverty reduction, environmental protection, peace-building and the promotion of human rights. BAB is a member of the Core Committee of the Housing Rights Task Force.