

Arrest of three young indigenous Bunong farmers in Bu Sra Commune, Mondulhiri Province, Cambodia

On March 17, two young indigenous Bunong from Pu Lu village, Prak Kael (26 years old) and Thos Thia (18 years old), were arrested by forest rangers. The young men helped on a farm of relatives on communal land of the Pu Lu indigenous community, which overlaps with the Phnom Nam Lyr Wildlife Sanctuary. When the forest rangers came to arrest them, one of the young men tried to escape, and on his arrest, he was beaten. The Department of Environment of Mondulhiri Province published the news of the arrest of the two Bunong on Facebook, stating that the reason for the arrest was to enforce the protection of the Phnom Nam Lyr Wildlife Sanctuary.

On March 23, another young man, Suay Luat, 21 years old, was arrested on the same charge of clearing forest pertaining to Phnom Nam Lyr Wildlife Sanctuary. The young man belongs to the indigenous community of Pu Tuet and had made a farm on indigenous community land, which overlaps with the Phnom Nam Lyr Wildlife Sanctuary.

Bunong villagers from the indigenous communities Pu Lu and Pu Tuet complain that the arrest is violating the rights of Indigenous Peoples to use their communal land for farming. Pu Lu and Pu Tuet had been registered as indigenous communities with the Ministry of Interior already in 2011, but the registration of their communal land is dragging on for 10 years and they have not been granted interim protection.

Bunong villagers accuse the forest rangers of inaction when they reported the logging of community land by outside individuals within the Phnom Nam Lyr Wildlife Sanctuary. The forest rangers never helped them stop the logging by arresting the intruders. Only now have the forest rangers taken action, but instead of protecting the indigenous forests from outside individuals, they are arresting Bunong who make a living from farming on their communal land.

Community leaders stress that the current events date back to the loss of indigenous communal land due to three economic land concessions of more than 12,000 hectares operated by the SOCFIN company, another economic land concession of 500 hectares operated by KPeace and a so-called social land concession of 2,400 hectares, which actually has been unofficially enlarged. These concessions strongly overlap with indigenous land, but they have been granted without consultation and free prior informed consent of the Bunong communities, which is a violation of indigenous peoples rights and Cambodian legal framework. The families of the three young men who have been arrested have lost their farms inside the concessions and today have nowhere else to farm than on the remaining communal land overlapping with Phnom Nam Lyr Wildlife Sanctuary.

Bunong villagers point to the unequal treatment of small people and large companies when it comes to forest protection. The five concessions were granted within the Phnom Nam Lyr Wildlife Sanctuary and around 15,000 hectares of forest were destroyed with impunity. Villagers claim that this forest had been used by the indigenous communities sustainably for centuries and only later had been designated as a wildlife sanctuary. When indigenous families make their traditional small farms on communal land inside the protected area they

are criminalized, while individuals from outside and large companies can destroy indigenous communal forest without penalty.

Local Bunong leaders stress that the protection of forest is very important to them. They ask, where have the conservation organizations been when concessions were granted within the Phnom Nam Lyr Wildlife Sanctuary? And where have the authorities and the forest rangers been when they asked them for help to protect their forests? And why do they now go hard on indigenous farmers making a traditional living on their community land? Rumors are circulating in the villages that the arrests are related to a major environmental protection program funded by the European Union and WWF, where little has happened on the ground in recent years to effectively protect the forests, and that it is now time for the authorities to show that they are working by arresting small indigenous people.

The Bunong villagers want to stop this injustice and are demanding that the three young men be released from custody and the charges against them dropped. They also want immediate interim protection of their indigenous communal land.