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CAMBODIA : THE BITTER TASTE OF SUGAR

MISSION REPORT /// MARCH 2014



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This report was written by Katia Roux (Peuples Solidaires-ActionAid France).

Contributions by Isabelle Brachet (ActionAid).

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Church novice collecting wood on what remains of the rice fields after the arrival of the company, Kampong Speu, Cambodia.



INTRODUCTION

Forced expulsions, destroyed crops, houses razed and burnt to the ground – the accounts of rural communities in the provinces of Oddar Meanchey and Kampong Speu are damning. For a number of years, sugar manufacturers – encouraged by the European initiative “Everything But Arms” – have been accorded economic land concessions on a large scale to the detriment of local populations. Deprived of their own lands, thousands of families are now struggling to survive.

Throughout the past fifteen years, the Cambodian government has granted land concessions to private investors – both Cambodian and foreign – on 45 % of its territory. Since 2008, 2.6 million hectares – or 76 % of the country’s arable land – were passed from the hands of farmers to those of agricultural companies, in order to export essentially sugar and rubber. These concessions are often accorded in violation of the rights of local populations living on these lands, and for the benefit of a notoriously corrupt elite¹.

Intimidated, harassed, and even imprisoned, the victims of these land grabs ask for only one thing: to regain their lands.

From January 21st to February 2nd 2014, Peoples Solidaires-ActionAid France visited the Oddar Meanchey and Kampong Speu provinces in Cambodia and produced this report.

1. <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2013/results/>





CAMBODIA AND THE QUESTION OF DEVELOPMENT

Despite a dynamic economy and strong decline in the poverty rate during the past few years, Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with 20.5 % of its population living below the poverty line². Moreover, in the region, it is the country where the inequalities in terms of the benefits derived from development growth are the most flagrant – a situation which the UNDP characterises as appalling³.

Cambodia today has close to 15 million inhabitants, of which 85 % live in rural areas and of which 2/3 are dependent on agriculture.

In the past few years, Cambodian lands have been the object of economic concessions accorded on a large scale to national and foreign agribusiness companies. Granting land to companies is strongly promoted on the one hand by the government policies that implements them in order to attract private investors, and on the other hand by trade policies such as the European initiative “Everything But Arms”, which aims to encourage foreign investment in the least developed countries.

2. Source : World Bank

3. <http://www.kh.undp.org/content/dam/cambodia/docs/PovRed/2013HDRAnalysisonCambodia.pdf>



Woman working on the sugar cane plantation of the Phnom Penh Sugar Company, Kampong Speu, Cambodia.





Families dispossessed of their lands, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia.



THE “EVERYTHING BUT ARMS” INITIATIVE

In 2001, The European Union adopts the “Everything But Arms” (EBA) initiative, which gives all 48 least developed countries full duty free and quota-free access to the EU for all their exports with the exception of arms and armaments. This therefore accords them preferential access to the European market, in order to attract private investors and to promote their own economic development.



CAMBODIA AND THE QUESTION OF DEVELOPMENT

The EBA initiative was conceived with the manifest intention to attract private investors in the poorest countries, but it contains no effective mechanism to ensure that these investments do not infringe on the human rights of the populations that are supposed to benefit from them.

The rapid progression of the sugar sector in Cambodia bears witness to the dramatic consequences of such a development model. Since the complete liberalisation of sugar exchanges in 2009, Cambodian sugar exports to Europe increased from 51 000 dollars to close to 13 million dollars in 2 years. The agro-industrial sugar companies therefore rushed to acquire the country's lands to profit from this privileged access to the European market, at the expense of the local population living off these lands.





THE PROVINCE OF ODDAR MEANCHHEY

In 2008, 19,700 hectares of land were granted – for a period of up to 70 years – to three sugar companies (Angkor Sugar Company, Tonle Sugar Cane Company, and Cane and Sugar Company), all of whom are linked to the Thai sugar giant Mitr Phol⁴.

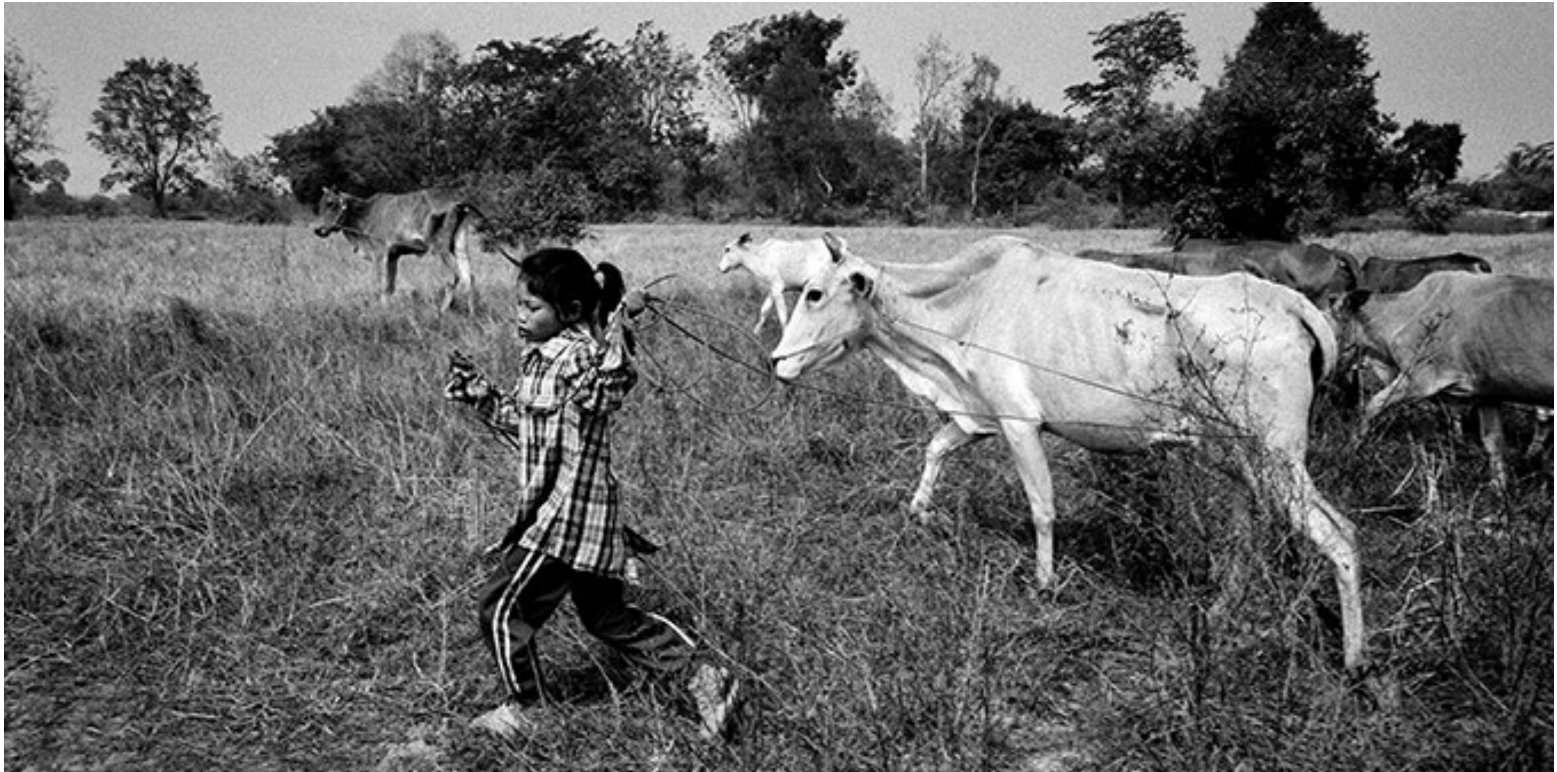
The concessions encroach considerably upon the private lands in the districts of Samrong and Chong Kol, and lead to forced expulsions, significant deforestation, and an increased militarisation of the area, all of which affects more than 1,600 families according to local NGOs. The families that attempt to resist the grabbing of their lands face intimidation from police forces, arrest, and incarceration.

After having lost their lands for the benefit of sugar producers, many families resort to the option of illegal immigration to Thailand. Those that stay have no other choice but to work for the companies' plantations, where the work is irregular, the conditions are poor, and the salary is insufficient to allow families to fulfil their needs. It is impossible for those working on these plantations to demand better working conditions because trade unions are not tolerated⁵. The vast majority are now without of land and housing, and are forced to put themselves into debt to survive.

Currently, a small fragment of the concession is used for sugar cane farming, the rest being used for manioc farming.

4. http://www.equitablecambodia.org/website/admin/upload/sidebar/Bittersweet_Harvest.pdf

5. For additional information on union rights violations in Cambodia, see: <http://survey.ituc-csi.org/Cambodia.html?lang=fr#tabs-3>



Sok Ni, 12 years old, Trapeang Veang, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia.

After having lost their lands in 2007, the parents of Sok Ni left to work in Thailand. They return only once a year for the rice crop. Before and after school, Sok Ni looks after the village cows in order to make a bit of money and pay her parent's debt.





THE PROVINCE OF ODDAR MEANCHEY

/// FAMILIES DISPOSSESSED OF THEIR LANDS ///

In January 2014, the families that lost their lands assemble in the village of Boss. They tell of how their houses were burnt down, their lands seized, and their crops destroyed to make way for the company.



Expropriated families from the villages of Khtum, Ta Man, Trapeang Veang, Ou Ampil and Bak Nim, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia.



Expropriated families from the villages of Khtum, Ta Man, Trapeang Veang, Ou Ampil and Bak Nim, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia.

Formerly self-sufficient through rice farming, these families are now overburdened with debt and unable to produce or buy their own food. They all have the same objective: to regain their lands or to obtain fair compensations.

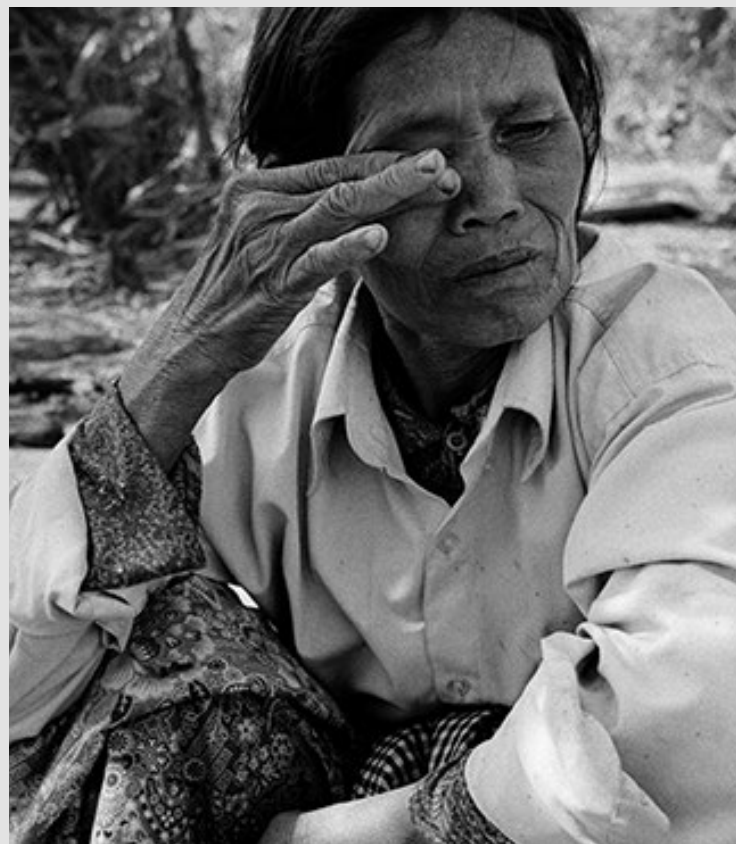


THE PROVINCE OF ODDAR MEANCHHEY

/// PORTRAIT OF HEUN SAVY ///

Heun Savy lost 5 hectares of land as well as her house, which was burnt down in the village of O'Bat Moan. Under the guise of compensation, the company gave her a small sliver of land strewn with rocks and stones, which she is unable to cultivate.

Her daughter is forced to leave for Thailand to find work in order to support the family. Savy no longer has any news from her daughter and struggles to take care of her two grandsons.



Heun Savy, 54 years old, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia.



Veu, 6 years old, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia.

Veu (6 years old) tries to help his grandmother find food while his older brother (10 years old) lives at boarding school. Like most of the families of O'Bat Moan, Savy finds herself overburdened with debt and incapable of fulfilling her own needs and those of her family.





THE PROVINCE OF ODDAR MEANCHHEY

/// PORTRAIT OF SOUN SOMANG ///

Soun Somang is a veteran of the Cambodian army who in 1983 lost his leg to a landmine during the Vietnamese occupation. He was forced to quit the army and in 2005 received 5 hectares of land, which he cultivated to feed his 9 children.

In 2006, he was asked to return his land. Somang went to Phnom Penh to protest and found himself accused of fraud, imprisoned, and condemned to pay 2300 US dollars in fines.

In 2008, when the company took his land, he was left with no means of subsistence. His eldest son went to seek a better life in Thailand leaving Somang to look after his 2 grandchildren.



Soun Somang, 56 years old, Boss village, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia.

THE PROVINCE OF ODDAR MEANCHEY

/// PORTRAIT DE HOY MAÏ ///

In 2009, Hoy Maï lost the 20 hectares where she cultivated rice since 2003.

“The 9th October 2009, the soldiers arrived in trucks to take our lands. I refused. Five months pregnant, I walked for three days to get to Siem Reap, then to Phnom Penh, to protest near to the Prime Minister”, she explains.

Hoy Maï was arrested and imprisoned for 8 months without judgement: *“I did not leave prison until the day I gave birth, and then I was put back in prison with my baby.”*



Hoy Mai, 51 years old, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia.



Son of Hoy Mai, 13 years old, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia.

Hoy Mai now lives in Taman and farms rice and manioc on the lands of others.

“Now I don’t protest anymore”, she says, “but I want to get my land back.”

Her husband died two years ago. She has eight children, three of whom have left for Thailand to work in the construction industry. Forced to live in very difficult conditions, Hoy Mai is still hoping her land will be returned.



THE PROVINCE OF ODDAR MEANCHEY

/// PORTRAIT OF CHHUN KOLAB ///

In 2007, Kolab lost her 5 hectares of land. Her husband left for the Thai border to find work. To feed her four children and her mother, Kolab cuts manioc, helped by her kids when they do not have school.



Chhun Kolab, 27 years old, and her daughter Phay Kanhia, 4 years old, village of Bak Nim, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia.



Dina (daughter of Chhun Kolab), 7 years old, village of Bak Nim, Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia.



THE PROVINCE OF KAMPONG SPEU

In February 2010, the Cambodian government granted two adjacent land concessions to the companies Phnom Penh Sugar and Kampong Speu Sugar. The former received 9,000 hectares in the Thpong district, in the name of senator and businessman Ly Yong Phat. The latter received 9,052 hectares in the adjacent Oral district, in the name of his wife.

In March 2011, the Prime Minister Hun Sen declassified 4,700 hectares of land in the Oral Protected Area for the Kampong Speu Sugar Company bringing the total area of the land occupied by the two companies to 23,000 hectares. In December 2012, the company opens an ultramodern sugar refinery factory at a cost of 150 million dollars.

According to local community representatives, the concession given to this company encroaches upon more than 2,000 hectares of private agricultural lands belonging to more than 1,100 families in 10 officially recognised villages and 5 non-recognised villages in the commune of Amliang, Thpong district. The concession given to the Kampong Speu Sugar Company also affects 6 villages in the Oral district.

In addition to agricultural land, the two concessions encroach on land dedicated to pastures, water supplies, and forest land. The affected populations were accorded small fragments of stony and non-arable land not far from the sugar plantation. They can no longer farm rice and are forced to sell their livestock or work in the sugar cane fields in order to survive.

6. http://www.equitablecambodia.org/website/admin/upload/sidebar/Bittersweet_Harvest.pdf



Young boy working on the plantation of the Phnom Penh Sugar Company, Kampong Speu, Cambodia.





THE PROVINCE OF KAMPONG SPEU

/// WORK IN THE SUGAR CANE FIELDS ///

Ly Yong Phat's Phnom Penh Sugar Company employs 3,000 workers on the sugar cane plantations, paying on average 3.50 dollars per day. Contracts, like trade unions, are non-existent.



Workers leaving for the sugar plantations, village of Kork, Kampong Speu, Cambodia.



Arrival of workers at the sugar cane fields of the Phnom Penh Sugar Company, village of Kork, Kampong Speu, Cambodia.



THE PROVINCE OF KAMPONG SPEU

The working conditions in the sugar cane fields are extremely difficult. Intense heat, lack of shelter; the agricultural labourers suffer from head and stomach pains. Those who cut the sugar canes do not have working hours: they are paid by the quantity of canes cut.



Sugar worker, plantation of the Phnom Penh Sugar Company, Kampong Speu, Cambodia.



Sugar worker, plantation of the Phnom Penh Sugar Company, Kampong Speu, Cambodia.



THE PROVINCE OF KAMPONG SPEU

“I worked in the sugar cane fields twice. The conditions were so hard that all the money that i made was used to pay the doctor to treat me”, explains a representative of the affected communities.

“With our lands”, he continues, *“we could cultivate and stock our rice. With the canes we keep nothing.”*

Currently, the populations of Kampong Speu who lost their lands for the benefit of Ly Yong Phat’s company, all want the same thing: to regain their lands or to obtain fair compensation in order to be able to live with dignity and fulfil their needs.



Pheak, 15 years old, plantation of the Phnom Penh Sugar Company, Kampong Speu, Cambodia.



Pheak, 15 years old, plantation of the Phnom Penh Sugar Company, Kampong Speu, Cambodia.

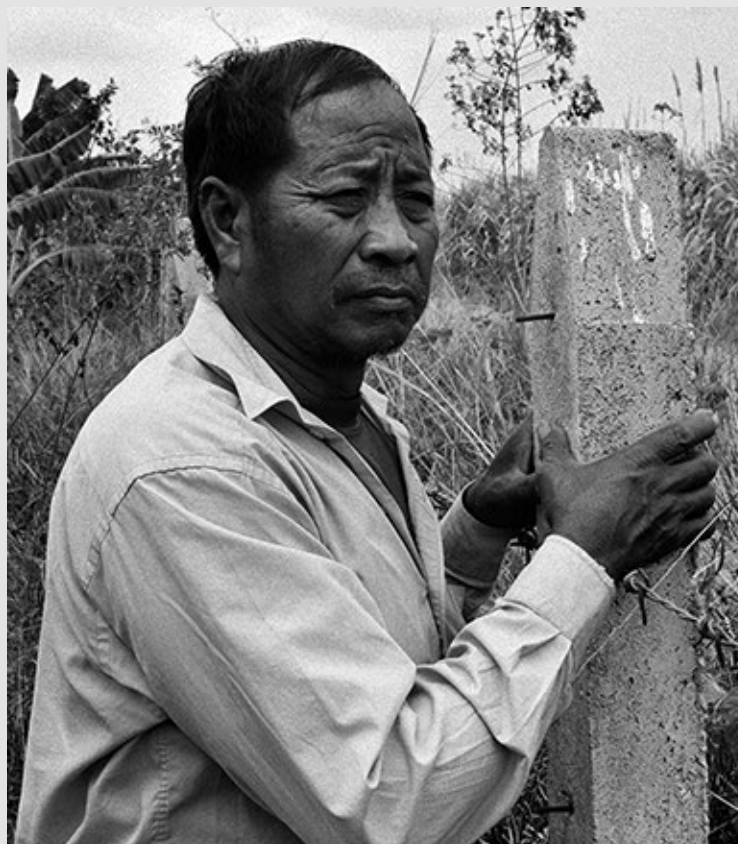
Although the company denies any instances of child labour on its plantation, many families say that they are obliged to send their children to work in the sugar cane fields in order to make a bit of money.

THE PROVINCE OF KAMPONG SPEU

/// PORTRAIT OF SEING SUY ///

In 2010, to make way for the Phnom Penh Sugar Company, the village of Pis was destroyed and its inhabitants rehoused by force on a small tract of rocky land at the foot of the mountain.

Seing Suy lost his 8 hectares of land. The company simply left him the small area where his house was situated. Behind the barbed wire lies his old land, where the sugar canes have replaced his rice crops.



Seing Suy, 55 years old, head of the village of Pis, Kampong Speu, Cambodia.



Seing Suy, 55 years old, head of the village of Pis, Kampong Speu, Cambodia.

Father of 8 children, many of whom have left for Thailand, Seing Suy struggles to make a living for his family.





CONCLUSION

In Oddar Meanchey as in Kampong Speu, the stories are the same: rural communities hunted from their lands to make way for agribusiness companies, rice fields razed in order to plant sugar cane, and families no longer able to feed themselves while private investors make a profit. The rights of local communities are flouted at every step in the process, leading further marginalisation and a new wave of “landless” people.

In Cambodia, the sugar manufacturers recognise that the EBA initiative represents an opportunity for them, opening up an interesting market. The European Union therefore cannot ignore the consequences of its trade policy on the human rights of populations in Cambodia without neglecting its duty, established by article 208 of the Treaty of Lisbon, to implement consistent development policies.

As recently highlighted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the right to food, “the promotion of an export-oriented agriculture, often based on the exploitation of disadvantaged labour, harmed family farms where food crops were destined for local consumption.”

The Cambodian government must ensure that victims of land grabs regain their lands or receive fair compensation. It must also guarantee the respect of working conditions that conform to the international standards for plantations. Finally, the European Commission should urgently launch an investigation into the violations of human rights linked with the production and exportation of sugar from Cambodia to the European Union.



Fields razed for the sugar cane plantations, Koh Kong, Cambodia.

Peuples Solidaires - ActionAid France :

Founded in 1983, Peuples Solidaires-ActionAid France is an international solidarity organisation. Our members and local groups support men and women who, throughout the world, fight for their rights. Peuples Solidaires-ActionAid France informs the public, mobilises citizens, alerts the media, puts pressure on decision-makers and supports civil society organisations in the South.

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SOLIDAIRES**
actionaid

Fédération Peuples Solidaires

2B, rue Jules Ferry

93 100 Montreuil – France

Tél. : +33 (0) 1 48 58 21 85

www.peuples-solidaires.org



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