

## **CAMBODIA SUGAR: Testimonies**

**Keo Chhorn**, 63, is a father-of-six, from Sre Ambel district, Koh Kong province, south-western Cambodia. He lives with his second wife and their four children, 18, 12, nine and five-years-old.

Mr Keo had three hectares of land, about 1km from his home, where he grew watermelon, rice and cashews. He could earn around \$1,300 a year from his crops. He has no land title but the house has been in his wife's family since 1979. He moved to the village in 1990.

"I was very happy living here and never had to worry that we didn't have enough food to eat. The first I knew that there was a problem was when I heard bulldozers clearing our land. The villagers gathered together and tried to stop the bulldozers clearing the land but we didn't succeed. We kept meeting and having protests.

"I saw that some people were offered compensation, but no one from the company ever came to me to offer money. I don't know why.

"We just have a tiny amount of land now around this house. My oldest sons live in Thailand. The oldest works in construction. He sends home around 1,000 Baht a month. My 18-year-old works in Koh Kong for a hydropower company.

"My youngest sons go to school, but during the sugar cane harvest [December-March] they often come with me to the sugar plantation where we cut sugar.

"I work for the sugar plantation during the harvest time. For one bunch of sugar cane - that's 20 pieces of cane - we earn 100 Riel. In one day, I can collect 60-70 bunches, and will earn around 7,000 Riel [\$1 = 4,000 Riel].

"The company sets the working hours from 8am to 4pm. We get paid at the end of each day. My wife sometimes works for the company during the harvest time, but not often as now she has a heart problem.

"We don't get good money, but we have no other choice. I don't like taking the children, but I need their help so we can earn more money. For example, if I'm able to collect 60 bunches of sugar cane, my son can maybe collect 30 bunches. That means we can earn 9,000 Riel[about \$2.25].

"I'm still able to send the children to school but I've had to sell off my chickens to buy them things like pens, books and uniforms. Sometimes I can earn money doing some construction work in villages around here, like building dykes or doing some farming, but its not regular work.

"Before I was very happy. We could feed the family well. I had three plots of land, and we would get good harvests. But when the company came, we lost our land and it's very hard to find work to support the family, to feed them, and to send my children to school.

"Before, we'd eat three times a day, but now it is just twice a day. Before, I was able to feed all the family, we had no problems. It's very different now. I'm getting old and our fight for our land is facing deadlock. We are feeling hopeless. I'm not confident about the future. I'm getting old, I'm not so strong, and we can't do farming to support the family.

“I was really angry about what happened to me. Our land was taken and our complaints were rejected. I’ve calmed down a bit now as the community are joining together and raising our voice to fight. We are getting help from local organizations, and a lawyer is helping us with our legal complaints. Although I’m not as angry as before, I won’t stop fighting to get my land back. We’re determined to get a proper resolution for our case.

“Day to day, we don’t have enough rice to eat. We can get by for six months of the year, but then we have nothing left. We have to buy from other people. You can see for yourself that we have no rice stocks in our house - only a tiny amount of money for food. We are getting hopeless. I’m really worried about my family in the future.

“We are really concerned but we still continue the fight to get our land back, even though our complaints were rejected by the authorities. Even though we don’t get any compensation, we are determined to keep our fight – for the future of our younger generation.

“I lost my land, it was grabbed by the company. The company produces sugar. I know it goes to Thailand and onto the UK.

“I want to tell people, especially those in the UK this is not clean sugar. It comes from our blood, it comes from our land.”

**Sok Phoeurn**, 56, is from Sre Ambel district, Koh Kong province, south-western Cambodia. She is a widow – her husband died in 1988 – and has one son, Van Chantha, aged 29. He moved to Sihanoukville to find work on a construction site. His mother says he doesn’t make enough money to support her or get married.

Mrs Sok had two hectares of land from 1999, which was previously unused, unoccupied state land. There, she grew rice, mango, cashew nuts and jackfruit. She also built a small thatched hut on the land, where they sometimes lived. She was not living in the hut the day the land was taken from them.

She now has no land and no home and is currently staying rent-free in a house lent by a couple currently working in South Korea. She says she has no money to buy or rent anywhere. She has no documents to prove her ownership of the land, and was not offered any compensation. She is determined to continue fighting for her land.

“It wasn’t a big house, but my son and I could live together in happiness. When I lost my land and this small hut, I felt that whatever happened, I must continue to fight to get my land back. If you ask me to stop, I will never do that.

“I lost my husband, I have no land and I have no house. Now, even my child isn’t with me. If my son stayed here with me, we would have no food to eat. He had to move away.

“For day-to- day life now, I depend on my son. He sends me money so I can buy food.

“One day, I went to a police officer who controlled the bulldozers clearing the land and told him my land had been cleared and I should get compensation. He didn’t respond to my request so I went to the company, seeking compensation.

"I met with one person working at the company and asked him for some compensation. I suggested I should get a small amount of money because I'm a widow - at least so I could buy a small pig. His response was very rude. He said 'No land belonged to you so you are not entitled to any compensation. Not only will we not offer you money for a pig, but we won't even give you money to buy a small rat'."

"I feel so sad, but I am still struggling to fight to get my land back. Even though I have no money and struggle with my daily needs, I try my best to get my land back.

"I feel very hurt because this land was taken from me. I spent so much time and labour on the land and when it was grabbed, no-one from the local authority helped us. The company cleared the land and crops and bulldozed it.

"Land is very important for my life. It's why we are fighting so hard to get it back. Now, we have no land. We have met with many people, including company representatives [KSL] a few times. But they always lied to us.

"Some people work for the company during the sugar harvest, but I cannot. How can I work for the company when we are still suffering because of them? I earn a bit of money cleaning other people's houses, and sometimes I cook meals for people working on nearby construction sites.

"I would like to call for support and help from organisations to help us and raise my voice to those people or other countries who buy sugar supplies from this company. It's not clean sugar - it's blood sugar. Unless this problem is solved, please don't buy this sugar.

"We'll fight until we get justice."

**Touch Eng**, 75, is a widow, whose husband died in 1977. Her only surviving daughter, Touch Orn, 45, has mental health problems. They live together with two of her five grandchildren: granddaughters aged 15 and 12-years-old. They live in Sre Ambel district, Koh Kong province, south-western Cambodia.

Touch Eng had four hectares of land where she grew rice, mango, jackfruit and cashew nuts. This was enough to feed the family and sell, so that she made \$300 a year. She says she was never offered any compensation for the land that was taken.

Mrs Touch now makes money collecting leaves and vegetables from the forest between 3 and 4kms away from her home to sell. However, the two granddaughters no longer go to school as they cannot afford school uniforms or equipment and she had to sell two buffalos and five cows to pay medical bills for her daughter. Her youngest granddaughter helps other villagers grow crops on their plots, while the older one is a domestic cleaner.

(Crying while speaking)

"I have many difficulties. I'm old and can't provide for the family but I need to support two young children and my daughter who has mental health problems and cannot work. My granddaughters no longer attend school because I can't afford money for their uniforms and other school materials. I have no land to plant crops. I have no animals. I have no money to take my daughter to the doctor for treatment - not even enough money to see a traditional healer. It's very hard. I'm too old. I can't earn enough money. Life is difficult.

"This company that took our land feels it is influential and powerful and they consider us powerless.

"Land is important for us.

"I would like to appeal to anyone, wherever they live in the world, whoever hears my voice, please help me. I still expect to win back my land.

"Even though I am very old, I tell you, I am not giving up. I'm not giving up. I'm going to continue fighting until I die."

**Mon Yorm**, 57, has seven children. Her youngest son, 13, and daughter, 17, live with her and several grandchildren in Sre Ambel district, Koh Kong province, south-western Cambodia. She has lived there since 1979. Her husband no longer lives with them. After their land was taken, he was depressed and there was no work for him. He became a monk and moved to a pagoda about 100kms away.

Mon Yorm had 12 hectares of land but only cultivated on 4.5 hectares, growing cashews, mango, watermelon, vegetables, corn, chilli and potatoes.

"I was in Sre Ambel town when they started to clear the land. Villagers gathered at the chief's house and he told us what had happened. We went to look. There were bulldozers clearing the land and we tried to stop them. When we told them it was our land, the men on the bulldozers simply said they were following orders from the company.

"When the clearance began, my crops were ready to harvest. I reckon if I'd had time to pick them, they would have been worth about \$1,000.

"Some villagers were given money. I was offered \$35 dollars per hectare for my land. But it was a very low amount. If I had sold the land, it would be worth around \$5,000 per hectare, including the crops.

"Nowadays, I have no source of income. I've had to borrow about \$1,000 from microcredit companies, and they charge 3% interest. To pay that, I've had to borrow more money from some villagers. Now I owe about \$1500. I borrowed money to pay the loan then I had to borrow from the microfinance company again to pay back the villagers who lent me money.

"My children stopped going to school last year. There was no money to pay for their school needs. Also I got sick and money was a struggle.

"Some of my children live in Phnom Penh and work in an electronics factory and send me money, but it's not enough.

"I'm worried because I owe a lot of money and I'm also sick. I've had to pay around \$25 twice a month for treatment in a local clinic. When my lung problem was serious, I went to Phnom Penh and I had to pay \$250 for treatment.

"I used to have 10 buffalo and five cows but over time, I've sold them all to pay bills, for schools and to pay off loans. Before, we lived well: we ate three times a day and ate good food, we had rice stocks at home, gold jewelry and good clothes, but everything has gone.

“My husband became a monk for two reasons. During the Pol Pot regime, he made a promise that if he survived he would go to the monastery. The second reason was he was so depressed when our land was taken. There was nothing to do - no work. That’s why he went. If he stayed here, there would be nothing to do.

“I’m suffering the most. I’m very poor now, unable to earn money and - day by day - I’m getting sicker. But I have no money to pay the medical bills and my husband doesn’t look after me.

“Before, we lived happily here. We had animals like buffalo and cows, and lots of crops. But after the company came and took our land, we got poor and are poorer.

“I sold the animals because I was scared if they walked into the plantation, the guards would shoot them. It happened once: the security men took away my buffalo and I had to pay them money to get it back.

“I am getting sick. We sold the animals one by one to feed the family and so on. I’m getting old and can’t afford to feed my family. Now I face a difficult life and just have this house. If I am not strong enough, even this house might go. I appeal to people to help us.

“Even though we have been fighting with the company for seven years to get our land back, we haven’t any result. But you can see, to my left and right, there are children here who are very young. Land is very important for them. I will continue to fight for my land until I die. I’m fighting for the land for these young children and their future.

“Before this problem, I could plant crops on my land, which were enough to feed us and earn us money. We were very happy. Land is very important to me, it’s important for my family and the next generation.

“In general, people around here are facing a more miserable life. But my family is facing more problems than most because others have a husband or wife who can earn money. Some families have difficulties and are in debt. They don’t have enough food to eat.”

**Teng Kao**, 53, has six children and is a community representative. He lives in Sre Ambel district, Koh Kong province, south-western Cambodia. He used to have 14.5 hectares of land, growing cashew nuts, mangos, bamboo, tamarind, sugar palm, rice, watermelon and vegetables, and could earn between \$1000-1200 a year. Some of his children are grown up, but three are teenagers and two go to school. He was never offered compensation for his land or crops.

When he had land, Mr Teng had 15 buffalo and 17 cows but now he has seven buffalo and five cows. “I had to sell them as there was no more grazing land they could use,” he explained.

“Before, we lived very happily and earned good money. We were able to buy the food we needed, pay for new motorcycles, and pay for the children’s schooling. Now, I can say we are 100% changed. We have fallen to a very poor condition and I am really concerned about the future.

“We used to eat three times a day, now it’s just twice a day. We hardly ever eat meat, as it’s expensive. We mostly eat vegetables and fish.

"Now I go to the forest where I can earn money collecting fallen wood for firewood, and bamboo. I can go a couple of days a week and can earn around 10,000-20,000 riel (\$2.50-\$5.00).

"I've been one of the community representatives since 2006. I was chosen by other villagers, since I was also affected and a victim. I'm someone who can stand up and speak to the authorities.

"I've travelled several times to Thailand, and also to the UK and Sweden to raise this case at meetings with Bonsucro [Better Sugarcane Initiative - a not-for-profit initiative dedicated to reducing the environmental and social impacts of sugar cane production], lawyers and Tate and Lyle. I don't know how long it will take to resolve everything, but we will continue our case.

"I never thought when we started our action that we would still be fighting. I was told by [the Thai owner of the sugar of the plantations] KSL to stop making all our demands. They told me 'You will never get what you want', but I told them that I spent a lot of time working on my land and had lost everything. I said I believed justice did exist and that I will fight until I die.

"Due to the confiscation of our land, our community lost the land it used to have for agriculture. We lost our crops and our means of a livelihood. We lost grazing land for our animals and some villagers had cattle confiscated or shot by the company. We lost a lot of fish as some of the water streams got filled up by soil from the land cleared by the company. We think there is another environmental impact caused by chemicals that the company is using. Many of our children don't go to school now as we have no money. They are losing their education.

"When we went to the forest we used to drink from the stream but now it's contaminated and we have to take water from home. Our skin itches and fish have died. Even ducks that have eaten the fish have died.

"About 80-90% of people here have lost hope. Before we had freedom to move, to walk freely, but now we have fear and are scared. Before we had hope for the future: money, food and transportation. I used to believe if I earned enough money, I could afford to buy a car. But now, we have lost our dreams and expectations. We continue to fight, because we have nothing more to lose.

"I had two plots of land – altogether I owned 14.5 hectares. However, I can't go there any more - we're forbidden and security guards prevent us from accessing the land.

"I didn't receive any compensation from the company. I had many different crops growing on the land when it was taken. At the time, the company that took the land said it only had a little money and couldn't pay for crops on the land.

"The impact in general, for the community, and not just me, has been huge. We lost our land for farming and growing crops. Second, we have lost grazing areas for our animals to feed, and thirdly, there is the environmental impact and pollution. Many of the water canals were filled by land the company cleared away for its plantation.

"We don't have enough food to eat day-to-day, we can't earn money so that we can send our children to school, and we don't have money if we get ill and need any

medical treatment. People have died because they didn't have money for proper medical treatment.

"We are suffering more and more. Before, we never got into debt but after we lost the land, we did. Most of the community has to borrow money from microfinance companies. We owe them money, but are unable to pay it back.

"I would request to all agencies, local and international, and people living in the UK to please help us to put pressure on the company. We want our land back so that we can feed our families.

"We've been fighting the company for seven years and still we don't have any positive outcome. But we still keep fighting. Land is really important to us. There is a Khmer saying: fish depend on water like people depend on land. The 200 families here will continue to fight. We need land to support our lives."