

NATIONAL Briefing

Opposition Activist Beaten in Battambang

A Sam Rainsy Party activist was seriously beaten in Battambang province earlier this month after he encouraged a neighbor to post a sign board for the opposition party, a senator said Tuesday. Vy Vanda, 33, an activist in Kors Kralor district, suffered serious head injuries after a district Sam Rainsy Party inauguration ceremony Aug 26, said Sam Rainsy Party Senator Meng Rita. Vy Vanda and other party members had been threatened on the afternoon of the ceremony by a CPP commune chief, the senator said. The chief told the opposition activists that they did not have permission to establish a Sam Rainy Party outlet on the land, and threatened to "eliminate" all the party's signs and "ringleaders." Meng Rita said. As Vy Vanda was walking home from the ceremony later that night he was attacked by two unknown men, Meng Rita said. Deputy District Police Chief Seak Phea said Tuesday police suspect that Vy Vanda had been drunk and had fallen on his own. (*Yun Samean*)

Council Approves 2001 Expenditure Figures

Cambodia posted a budget deficit for 2001, according to expenditure figures approved by the Council of Ministers Friday. Actual budget revenue for 2001 was around \$616 million, compared to a projected revenue of \$635 million. Actual expenditure was \$652 million in 2001, leaving a budget deficit of around \$36.5 million. Council spokesman Penn Thol said the deficit was due to expenditures made for the National Assembly, flood and drought victims and late expenditures in 2000 that were paid for out of the 2001 budget. Revenue increased 9.1 percent in 2001 compared to 2000, he said. The Council also approved a draft subdecree that would make any private fishing lots state property. The decree would merge private and government lots on the Tonle Sap into one state-owned company, Penn Thol said. Prime Minister Hun Sen called on authorities to help families affected by recent drought and floods by transplanting rice in time for the rainy season. (*Pin Sisovann*)

5 Prison Guards Cleared of Torture Charges

BY NHEM CHEA BUNLY
AND DAVID KIHARA
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

KOMPONG CHAM TOWN - Kompong Cham provincial court acquitted five prison guards on Friday of allegations they tortured inmates, despite testimony from four victims and four witnesses that the guards beat inmates.

The case was considered a key test for the Cambodian judiciary in finding justice for victims of prison abuse. Rights workers have long alleged that torture is commonly used by prison guards.

Friday's trial stems from a December 13, 1999, attempted prison escape by five inmates at Kom-

pong Cham provincial prison who were captured immediately and allegedly beaten severely.

Three of the prison guards told the court that during the 1999 escape bid they cornered the prisoners and used minimal force to restrain them. Two other guards present at the scene did not appear in the trial, which has taken two years to reach a conclusion.

"When the prisoners were running away, I tried to prevent them from leaving. I never hit them. I threatened them twice with a broomstick, but never hit them," said prison guard Hak Yi.

Four of the five alleged beating victims testified in court that they

planned their 1999 jail break for at least five days before they made their escape bid. All were serving long sentences—between 8 and 21 years—for violent crimes such as murder and robbery.

Alleged victim Thun Tha said after his capture a guard hit him with a large rock.

"Another guard threw a stone at me, and they kicked me in the mouth," Thun Tha said. "One beat me," he said.

New York-based Human Rights Watch on Wednesday called the trial "precedent setting" as it was one of the few times prison guards have been called to account in court.

Thach Sang Claims He Was Tired of Politics

BY PHANN ANA
AND KEVIN DOYLE
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Former Funcinpec party member Thach Sang said on Thursday that disillusionment with the state of Cambodian politics and pressure to step down prompted his resignation from the royalist party and the National Assembly.

Thach Sang's resignation was made public last weekend and followed a high-level police investigation of his leadership role in a movement bent on independence for the ethnic Khmer population of Vietnam's Mekong Delta region.

Efforts to strip Thach Sang of parliamentary immunity for setting up the US-based Kampuchea Krom National Liberation Front were under way in Cambodia, police officials said.

"I saw that I should get away from the political party because none of the parties serve the nation, and Khmer people," Thach Sang said by telephone Thursday

from Lowell, in the US state of Massachusetts.

Thach Sang said he was not forced to resign from the royalist party because of his demands for ethnic Khmer independence in the Mekong Delta, a territory referred to as Kampuchea Krom by many Cambodians.

"I wanted to get away from Vietnamese pressure on the Kingdom of Cambodia to have my National Assembly immunity lifted," he said. "I think Funcinpec was under pressure," he added without elaborating.

Interior Ministry spokesman General Sok Phal denied the claims of foreign pressure.

"We are independent," he said.

Prince Norodom Ranariddh, Funcinpec leader and National Assembly president, received Thach Sang's resignation last week in a short faxed message stating the former parliamentarian wished to devote himself to the "liberation of Kampuchea Krom."

Thach Sang's KKNLF emerged from obscurity in June to announce by e-mail its declared goal of forcing Hanoi to accept an independent ethnic Khmer state in southern Vietnam.

Military analysts and Cambodian officials have scoffed at the KKNLF goal of opposing Vietnam. But Hanoi was infuriated in June when more than 2,000 people protested alleged abuse against ethnic Khmers living in Vietnam.

Ethnic Khmer from Vietnam now living in Cambodia have reported extreme poverty in Vietnam and unfair treatment after Hanoi's victory over the Saigon government in 1975.

The Vietnam News Agency reported on Wednesday that officials in Vietnam's Soc Trang province, home to 350,000 ethnic Khmer, have embarked on a program to reduce to 20 percent the number of ethnic Khmer households living below the poverty line.

Arrests May Scare Child Sex Tourists Away

BY KEVIN DOYLE
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

The recent jailing and arrests of child sex offenders in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap province may deter foreign sex tourists from targeting Cambodia, a regional conference on preventing child abuse in tourism was told on Friday.

The Asia Regional Think Tank on the Prevention of Child Abuse in Tourism Destinations also said embassies of the countries from which sex tourists come must cooperate to stamp out abuse by their citizens in Cambodia and the region.

The arrests may have indicated

to potential sex offenders that Cambodia is not as easy a place for indiscretions as it once was.

"We know that offenders will only go to places they think they will not get caught," Christine Beddoe, program manager of Child Wise Tourism, told the conference.

Beddoe said that her organization recently received information that a sex offender in Vietnam reported that he had now stopped traveling to Thailand and Cambodia because it had become "too difficult" to procure underage sexual partners.

However, if child sex tourists stop traveling to Cambodia, they

may begin to target other destinations such as Laos, Vietnam and the Indonesian island of Bali, she said.

"To have maximum impact in Southeast Asia we need collaboration," Beddoe told the audience of child rights workers, diplomats and staff from the state tourist authorities of Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

"The role of embassies becomes vital in exchanging information that may lead to more timely and efficient investigation. We call on all embassies to develop child protection policies," she said.

A New Fear

Pursat Environmentalists Clash With Businessmen, Military, Villagers

Editor's note: This is the last in a series of three stories looking at new and unorthodox ways Cambodian and foreign conservation officials are fighting to save Cambodia's wildlife.

BY RICHARD SINE
AND VAN ROEUN
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

VEAL VENG DISTRICT, Pursat province - When his district governor first offered Hem Salouth a job as a Pursat Provincial Department of Environment forest ranger, he felt not gratitude, but fear.

"I didn't know what 'environment' meant," he said. "I thought it meant soldiering, so I was very afraid. Then the governor explained the meaning of environment to me."

For Hem Salouth, who said he was drafted into being a soldier for the Khmer Rouge for two terrifying years, the fear was very real. Today, Hem Salouth is not a soldier, but he has a dangerous job. For a tiny government salary, he and his team of rangers trek into the jungle for days at a time carrying little more than a hammock, some rice and dried fish, and loaded AK-47s.

Their opponents are also armed, usually better paid and have friends in high places. Just last month, the team was involved in two tense standoffs with military police believed to be in cahoots with loggers. Also last month, a ranger with the NGO Conservation International in the same area was held at bay by villagers, wielding axes and machetes, who were angry at anti-logging enforcement attempts.

The logging moratorium notwithstanding, things appear to be heating up in Phnom Samkos Wildlife Refuge. It's not the company that holds the concession that is logging here, but the military itself, with the spoils going over the Thai border, say officials with the province's Department of Environment and Conservation International.

The plunder of the forest and its wildlife is being aided by a recently renovated road, Route 56, which has made the area more accessible to poachers and loggers as well as to villagers seeking trade.

"Two years ago when I came here, there was very little activity because it was hard to get here,"

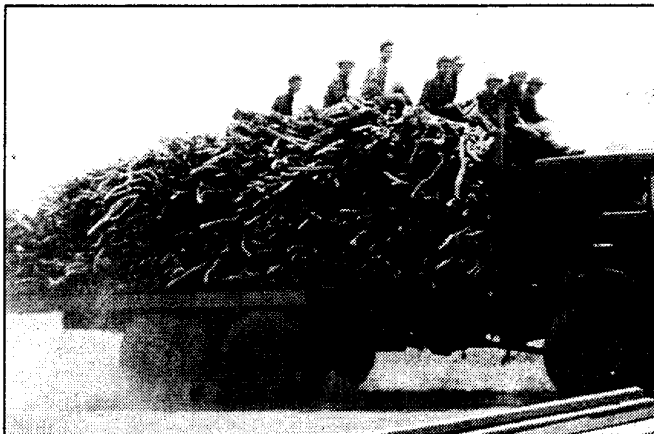


Photo courtesy of Ben Hammond

A truck loaded with yellow vine leaves the forest in Pursat province. Observers hope a decline in the yellow vine trade will stall the destruction of Pursat's rivers and forest.

said Ben Hammond, an Australian adviser to the Department of Environment. "Now there are good roads, big trucks and businesspeople.

"The time to start doing something is now. If we wait any longer, there won't be anything here worth protecting."

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Hammond is more adventurous than the average expatriate, most of whom spend much of their time speaking English in air-conditioned offices in Phnom Penh.

Two years ago, Hammond worked at a local environmental department in Australia, advising citizens on how to save water. Then, working through a volunteering agency, he took a job with Pursat's environmental department, where he works for a tiny stipend, is the only person who speaks more than rudimentary English—and air-conditioning is but a dream.

Now he's mapping out uncharted forested areas and trying to professionalize employees who themselves are working on tiny salaries. He periodically treks into the jungle with his staff. He has skilled guides, however. Hem Salouth is valued by the team for his experience trekking through the jungle for weeks at a time, collecting aloewood. Now, of course, it's his job to stop it, because collecting aloewood requires chopping down a tree.

Hem Salouth spends most of his time on his farm. But his small salary—about \$12.50 a month—makes it worth his while to patrol in the forest about twice a month,

often in response to tips about illegal hunting or poaching.

"Some villagers were angry with the crackdown, but when we explain the bad effects to the environment, they understand," he said.

For villagers living in villages terrorized by the Khmer Rouge only a few years ago and are still heavily mined, it can be frustrating to be told not to hunt large animals, fell trees for resale or harvest forest products—like yellow vine or aloewood—that require felling trees.

The impatience boiled over last month, when 49 villagers in O'Som commune held a ranger with the NGO Conservation International and demanded the return of confiscated chainsaws. Angry that the rangers had taken the tools of their trade, they also demanded food, said Chut Wutthy, a deputy director at CI.

The ranger, Hong Horn, was quickly returned. The protest was led by outside businessmen, not the villagers themselves, Chut Wutthy said. But he acknowledged that some villagers are upset by the enforcement actions.

"We say we are not just planning enforcement, but development too," he said.

More frightening are the army and military police believed to be assisting in logging or conducting it themselves. On July 18 a troop of four Department of Environment rangers was walking along

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Cruel...

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a road in O'Som commune near the village of Thma Da when they encountered some armed military border police.

"At the time we had four rangers with two guns and a mission letter from the Ministry of Environment," said Seng Proeun, a ranger and himself a former Khmer Rouge soldier. "We met with the border guards and said we were park rangers and wanted to help them crack down on illegal activities. Then they said they didn't know us at all, and they confiscated our guns and mission letter, citing security reasons. They didn't want us working there because they thought we would interrupt their business."

A few hours later the men saw a truckload of big timber bearing down on them.

"We went and stopped it, but one of the men—there were about 20—took out his pistol and pointed it at us. We stood still and watched the truck go by. We couldn't oppose them because we had no guns."

Hammond said his department planned to discuss the incidents with local military commanders. It's the military and the businessmen, he says, that he is aiming for.

"I think it is heating up here," he said. "The bigger the fish you try and catch, the more the fish will try and bite you. You can catch villagers any day of the week."

With development plans and funds not yet in place in the Cardamom Mountains—and thus little economy to speak of for its

small indigenous population—whether people work to protect the forest or destroy it seems mostly to depend on who is paying the bills.

Some military police log the forest or poach animals. Others work for Conservation International, protecting rangers. Some villagers work for businessmen sending logs and wildlife to Thailand. Others, like Hem Salouth and his crew, work for environmental protection agencies.

Then there are people who seem to straddle the fence, like Uon Yang, Veal Veng District Governor. Department of Environment officials said privately that he has been a useful ally, even providing tips on illegal activities. But Conservation International officials said he has given out permits to use chain-

saws without authorization from the Ministry of Environment, which controls the management of wildlife sanctuaries.

"There isn't any large-scale, business-related logging at all," Uon Yang said. "Transport is very hard because the road is bad, and now we have very strict laws."

Protecting the forest here is a tricky business, as there always appears to be a new threat around the corner. Poaching and logging are constant threats, but in recent years the new threat has been yellow vine, which is chopped, chipped and processed into a powder used in cosmetics and traditional medicines.

Businessmen pay villagers about one Thai baht, or about \$0.02 per kilogram to collect the vine for processing, Hammond says. The factories are usually staffed by outsiders or foreigners. The acid they use in processing can leak into streams and rivers.

Earlier this month, Hammond and his crew trekked off into the jungle to find a yellow vine factory that was no longer there, said Chut Vutthy, who said the yellow vine industry has been largely quashed in the Cardamoms for now, thanks to Conservation International-assisted police enforcement. Hammond, who lost his cellphone in Veal Veng, has been unreachable since reporters said farewell to him there, shortly before the planned factory bust.

Even if yellow vine is quashed for now, there are new riches threatening the forest, such as an oil called Tep P'rool, which is extracted from felled trees, Hammond said.