

Lacking Justice, Cambodians' Discontent Rises

Luke Hunt

September 14, 2012

Ieng Thirith, first lady of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot's minister for social affairs, was formally discharged from the Extraordinary Chambers for the Courts in Cambodia (ECCC) this week, reducing the number of senior leaders left to front the tribunal to three.

The reasons were justified. Ieng Thirith has Alzheimer disease and was ruled medically unfit to stand trial, a decision that came as no surprise to regular observers at the tribunal who have witnessed her outbursts and occasional erratic behavior.

But the ruling was cold comfort in a country that always seems to struggle to find well-deserved justice. Her release came as a journalist – who made a career out of covering the illegal logging industry – was shot dead and left in the back of a car, and as another went on trial.

Seventy-one-year-old Mam Sonando, Director of Beehive Radio and President of the Democrat Association, fronted the court after his July 15 arrest for allegedly leading a secessionist movement in northern Kratie province.

Man Sonando, is fierce critic of the government and officials who have overseen forced evictions and massive land grabs by large corporations. His supporters believe his arrest was connected with a broadcast involving the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Khmer People Power Movement (KPPM), which has alleged government involvement in crimes against humanity.

Claims of a plot to secede seem far-fetched but the death of Heng Serei Oudom struck a chord much closer to home. He had been covering forest crimes for the *Vorakchun Khmer* newspaper. His hacked and beaten body was found Tuesday in the trunk of his car.

His death also followed the assassination of Chhut Vuthy, a renowned environmentalist who was shot dead by a guard while investigating claims of illegal logging. Such killings are on the rise, and land grabbing is emerging as the major issue Prime Minister Hun Sen will face during next year's election.

Few doubt Hun Sen's control of Cambodia but his government is increasingly being seen as favoring large corporate concerns over regular villagers in the battle for land. At commune elections earlier this year his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won easily. However, the participation rate had slumped dramatically to 60 percent indicating a

growing level of dissatisfaction with a government whose landslide victory can also be attributed to an ineffective opposition.

But more broadly that dissatisfaction stems from villagers who feel they have been pushed off their land with inadequate compensation. It's the stuff of daily headlines and with the arrest of Mam Sanado and the killings of Heng Serei Oudom and Chhut Vuthy, it's an issue that won't be going away anytime soon.