

# Case Study

On

## Indigenous Peoples at Risk of Land Loss Demand an Immediate Solution from Authorities



*“I am alive again. I no longer die as there are organizations supporting me and making interventions. I hope that there will be solutions so that I can get my land back.”* said Mr. Broneang Kantai with hope during a follow-up forum held by COMFREL in Ratanakiri province. Kantai has been at risk of losing his land to a plantation company.

Reaching the age of 30, Mr. Broneang Kantai, a member of the Tich Kreung minority group, is married and has four children—two sons and two daughters. He lives in Kalai Tavong village, Phnom Kok commune, Veurn Sai district of Ratanakiri province. He makes a living by planting cashew trees and rice. In addition, Kantai makes an extra living by finding resin to sell to support his family’s livelihood. His family can get an annual harvest of only around 900 kilos of rice. His children, like other villagers’ children, have no education at all as there are schools, but no teachers in the area.

Kantai and his family have lived and been doing farming on 3.5 hectares of land for a long time.. District Environment Officers tried to persuade him and other indigenous villagers in the area to sell their own land to a Vietnamese-owned Cheng Long company, which would then invest in a rubber plantation, but the villagers refused. Since then, the villagers in Kalai commune have been at risk of losing their ancestral land.

Before the arrival of the rubber plantation investment company, Cheng Long, in the area, Phnom Kok commune chief Mr. **Bou Vanthak**, a Lao ethnic, had informed the villagers that they had to pay 19,000 riel for a five hectare plot of land in a bid to avoid land grabbing by the company.

Nevertheless, after paying the money required above, the District Environment Officers, in the same year, told Kantai and other villagers not to live on the area anymore as it would be made into conservative area.

Kantai did not follow the order of the District Environment Officers. Then the company, along with the police and military police (PM), came to Kantai's land, looking for him. They asked his wife where Kantai was. His wife responded that he was not at home. Suddenly, Kantai arrived and the company chased after him. Luckily, he was not arrested; he and his daughter ran into the forest. The company also destroyed his crops and farms and then told his wife that, ***“they would arrest and imprison Kantai as soon as they see him”***. When the staff of company left, Kantai went to meet the village and commune chiefs to ask for their intervention, but there was no solution. They told Kantai that they would discuss this with the district level officials. The police chief called Kantai on July 18, 2010 and tried to force him to thumbprint, handing over his land to the company, but he did not agree.

On the occasion of participating in the follow-up forum organized by COMFREL in Kalai Tavong village, Phnom Kok commune, Veun Sai district of Ratanakiri province on 19 July 2010, Kantai was very pleased that he could express his concerns. The forum was a chance for him as well as indigenous people who are suffering from land grabbing by companies and the powerful to voice their concerns and problems in order to be heard and seek intervention by authorities at all levels.

**Mr. Kam Feurn**, a District Councilor participating in this forum, showed his great attention to the issues raised by the forum participants and pledged to resolve the problems for the victimized people. He stated that, ***“I ensure that the issues raised by people here will be brought to a district council meeting for solution as I have never been aware of these”***.

Mr. **Chuon Pindara**, a Ratanakiri-based COMFREL Secretary, said that threatening and intimidation toward Kantai as an honest man are some of the strategies used by the company to deter other indigenous villagers from opposing the company's plan and to push them into selling their land.

Readers may note that Kalai Tavong village is one of the five villages in Phnom Kok commune of Ratanakiri province's Veun Sai district. This village is around 59 Km away from the provincial central area. People living in Phnom Kok commune are members of various indigenous groups such as Krin, Prouv, Lao and Loun. They make a living by doing shifting cultivation and depend on forest products such as resin, animal hunting, fruit picking and vine searching.