



Lao Villagers Denied Payment for Land by Vietnamese Firm



A Daklak-invested rubber plantation in Champassak province in Laos is shown in a file photo. RFA

Lao villagers formerly leasing land to a Vietnamese rubber company under a profit-sharing arrangement are now being refused compensation by the foreign-owned firm, which says the land belongs not to the villagers but to the state, Lao sources say.

Eighty families in Pak Houei village in Champassak province's Pathumphone district signed the agreement in 2009 with Vietnam's Daklak Rubber Company under which villagers would provide labor and 700 hectares of land for cultivation, with profits shared at 80 percent for those owning the land. Claiming growing losses over the next four years, Daklak then renegotiated its lease to terms more favorable to the firm, with villagers and the company taking profits in a new 50-50 split. But three years later, still losing money, the company brought in Vietnamese to work the land, saying the Lao villagers were poor workers and offering them compensation for the land's use instead.

Speaking to RFA's Lao Service, a villager said the proposed compensation, \$50 per hectare per year, was too low, and when Daklak raised its offer to \$55 per hectare, villagers requested the money in a lump sum payment covering the period 2009-2029. All payments by Daklak then ceased, with Daklak demanding proof the villagers owned the disputed land on which they have paid taxes and grown corn, bananas, and vegetables for generations.

"We would have accepted the new offer, even though we weren't happy with it," a village leader told RFA's Lao Service.

"Besides, we didn't want to upset the authorities," he said, adding that district and provincial authorities had pressured the Lao villagers to accept Daklak's offer.

Now, the villagers receive no money from the Vietnamese firm at all, sources say, adding that villagers have sent a letter to government authorities requesting fair compensation.

Speaking to RFA, an official of the provincial agriculture and forestry department claimed lack of detailed knowledge of the dispute over use of the land.

"I still don't know much about the \$55 compensation plan. I am not involved in this case," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Some of these cases are handled by the districts, and others are handled by the natural resources department or by the agriculture and forestry department," he said.

The seizure of land for development or agricultural use—often without due process or fair compensation for displaced residents—has been a major cause of protest in Laos and other authoritarian Asian countries, including Cambodia and Myanmar.

*Reported by RFA's Lao Service. Translated by Max Avary.
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