

## Helping Communities Protect Cambodia's Biodiversity

### **Community Acts to End Illegal Mining**

*January 26, 2008 Prey Doung Toteng, Cambodia.* Villagers and local police dismantled the workings of a rogue gold mining operation set up in this remote, heavily forested area of northern Cambodia.

The villagers, many of them members of the Kuy indigenous minority group, were acting to prevent the miners from continuing to pollute their water supply and further damage their forest environment. In 2005, the miners pushed their way into the forest without permission, cut down great swathes of old growth forest and established a sprawling, four hectare, gold dig. Of greatest concern to the villagers – the miners were using cyanide to leach gold from base rock, contaminating the ground water. This impacted rice yields, caused animals to get sick and die, and threatened the health of the community and the surrounding forest.



*Community members dismantling a leaching pit*

For two years, the villagers complained to provincial authorities but received no response. They telephoned Radio Free Asia in hopes of gaining international attention; this action was also met with no success. Finally, they convinced the local police to work with them and remove the mining operation.

The decision to challenge the gold mining operation was not spontaneous nor was it recklessly undertaken. It was organized by village leaders who had been trained in nonviolent advocacy and forest resource protection. They were members of a growing network of concerned forest communities encouraged and supported by East-West Management Institute (EWMI) under its USAID-funded Project on Justice and Rights (PRAJ). These communities are increasingly willing and able to advocate for themselves and protect their natural resources rights using peaceful methods.

The Prey Doung Toteng gold mine story is not over. Powerful business interests supporting the gold mining operation brought complaints against eleven of the people involved in removing the mining equipment; including three policemen.

*Working in partnership with grass roots groups, local governments and international organizations to build just, prosperous and democratic societies.*

The complaints were filed in provincial court and the cases are pending.

Now larger and more powerful mining and rubber interests threaten the whole of Prey Lang Forest, the lowland dry evergreen forest which is home to the Prey Doung Toteng village and the last largest forest of its kind in Indochina. Their development plans could transform the forest into an industrial zone. In 2009, 10,000 community members, from around the forest, including those in Prey Doung Toteng, petitioned the government to save the forest, as well as their homes and agricultural lands.

### ***EWMI Biodiversity Protection Program***

Cambodia is home to a wealth of natural resources and diverse ecosystems. These ecosystems are now under serious threat from rich, powerful developers who are rapidly transforming Cambodia's forests into plantations and mining operations. This unbridled exploitation of natural resources threatens the economic and social fabric of Cambodia's forest dependent communities, especially its indigenous minorities.

In recent years, Cambodian village communities have become more vocal in opposing developments such as plantations, mining concessions, and hydropower dams. Networks of community activists have helped to maintain community access to local fisheries, have stopped the granting of all logging concessions in Cambodia, and have forced the most powerful Cambodian companies to back away from planned plantation projects.

These community-based initiatives represent one of the greatest hopes for change in Cambodia. Recognizing this, in October 2007, USAID provided EWMI with funding to create a unique biodiversity protection program built upon the grassroots human rights initiatives EWMI had supported in the past through PRAJ. The main objective of the program is to improve the natural resource management of some of Cambodia's most threatened, biodiverse ecosystems. It proceeds from the premise that the people most able and most motivated, to protect and manage these precious forest resources are the people whose livelihoods and cultural survival depend upon them.

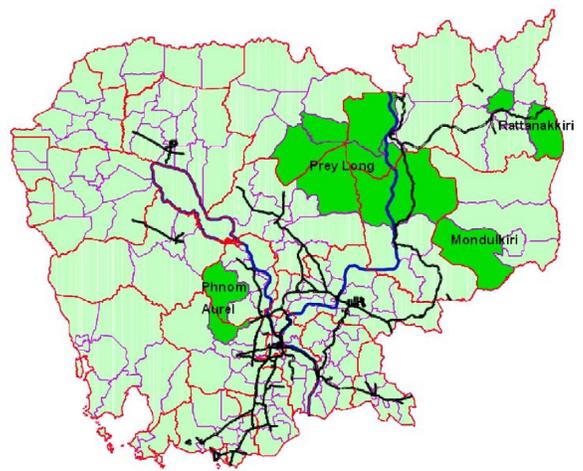
### ***Focus Areas***

The EWMI program focuses attention on two large, biodiverse areas that cover a number of provinces in Cambodia. These are:

- *Prey Lang Forest:* Under threat from mining, anarchic logging, plantations and other economic land concessions (including biofuel projects), planned social land concessions, poaching, and hydropower dams on the Mekong.
- *Phnom Aoral:* Under threat from anarchic logging, plantations and other economic land concessions, poaching, and resort development, including a golf course. Dams planned south and west of the area are also significant threats as they will flood large parts of protected areas.



Gold mine works



## ***EWMI's Approach***

EWMI's Biodiversity program builds better biodiversity management through support and technical assistance for local and national networking, grassroots advocacy, and cooperative community



*Community advocates and NGO workers learn about wildlife conservation efforts from Forest Administration officer*

management and protection of biodiverse areas. EWMI's program links to other agencies with sustainable livelihoods and community forest programs in the area.

*Grassroots Advocacy Support.* First and foremost, EWMI works with local people to help them organize and mobilize their communities to protect forests, while at the same time protecting their land and natural resource rights. This approach promotes community-owned and community-farmed buffer zones, in which communities are also engaged in forest protection and sustainable management activities. At the local level, EWMI does this by providing grant funding to local grassroots NGOs that have day-to-day contact with community members.

EWMI currently funds several local NGOs working with communities in the focus areas. These are: Community Economic Development (CED, Dey Ku Aphiwat (DKA), Indigenous Community Support Organization (ICSO), Community Capacities for Development (CCD), AEC, Organization to Promote Kuy Culture (OPKC), and Environment and Health Education. (EHE) These NGO assist local organizing and networking efforts, promote cooperation across broad areas, and organize needed training, such as legal awareness workshops. In addition, PRAJ partner, Khmer Youth and Social Development (KYSD) promotes environmental awareness and activism among university students, also linking to local youth activists.

EWMI also provides targeted technical assistance to the NGOs and to the forest communities. This assistance includes peer coaching in grassroots advocacy techniques, forest resource monitoring, planning for forest protection and management, land and resource rights education.



*Reporter interviews Kong Yu villagers after an October 2007 court hearing*

EWMI helps the communities share their experiences by supporting the creation of "community media." This means helping ordinary people in the community create slide shows, videos and popular entertainment – with a message. The aim is to increase information sharing between communities, strengthen community identity, and provide villagers an opportunity to reach broader audiences in their advocacy. Many communities and networks are now producing a variety of media (videos and photos) for their own purposes. In Sambour, Kratie, where community media is still in an early phase, community groups started to take photographs to illustrate their stories.

*National Networking and Advocacy.* In addition to broadening civic participation and environmental advocacy at the community level, EWMI works closely with two emerging national network—the Community Peacebuilding Network (CPN) and the Indigenous Representatives Active Members (IRAM)—to make the voice of Cambodia's poor heard at the national level. Network members have represented their concerns to important international

advocates, including UN Special Envoys for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders, the UN Special Rapporteur for Housing Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur for Indigenous People, the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous People's Rights, and the UN's Committee of Special Rapporteurs on International Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. They have advocated on environmental and land rights issues to the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Mekong River Commission, embassies and bi-lateral donors. Most importantly, they frequently engage with government officials- from village chiefs to parliamentarians, and represent their concerns regarding the exploitation of Cambodia's land and natural resources. This has included participation in consultations on Cambodia's draft National Forest Programme.



*Aerial view of Prey Lang forest canopy*

In the summer of 2008, the CPN conducted a national petition campaign calling for the withdrawal of illegal economic land concessions and the proper application of the law to protect natural resource rights. This has resulted in a petition filed with the Prime Minister's Office in June 2008 by more than 100 community representatives from 11 provinces with 42,000 thumbprints. As a follow-up to that petition, both the CPN and IRAM have cooperated in assisting communities coordinate complaints about land-grabbing and other violations of land rights at the national level. In August 2009, grassroots advocates submitted a total of 31 complaints, thumbprinted by 20,000 people, to Cambodia's Council of Ministers to call attention to specific cases of land-grabbing and illegal concessions in 19 out of 24 provinces and municipalities.

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