

All the News Without Fear or Favor

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Enric Catala

A van packed with logs drives down National Road 7 in Tbong Khmum province last week. Dozens of vans like it ply the road daily. This van ended up next to the Daun Roath border gate in Memot district, where local villagers regularly sell the logs to buyers from Vietnam.

Still Taking a Cut

On the border with Vietnam, the military plays middleman in the illegal timber trade

By ZOMBOR PETER
AND AUN PHEAP
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

SNUOL DISTRICT, Kratie province – In the dusty heart of town, where the main road from the Vietnamese border runs into National Road 7, a two-story billboard inveighs against the evils of illegal logging.

Looming over the crossroads' rickety food stalls and beat-up share taxis, the crude painting shows ea-

ger young men bulldozing virgin forest and chopping into thick, healthy tree trunks. Hovering above the scene in its own private bubble, a forlorn face peers down at them through the bars of a prison cell. Lawbreakers, the sign warns, could face five to 10 years in prison.

Yet every day, from dawn to dusk, and sometimes later, vans and motorbikes packed and stacked with high-grade timber speed past the

sign without a glance—and without a care. Arriving from the north, the vans veer west at the intersection toward border towns in neighboring Tbong Khmum province. The motorbikes take the slight turn southeast toward the local border gate at Tumpeang Sre, an easy 19 km from town.

The government claims that it has all but wiped out the country's booming illegal timber trade since

Prime Minister Hun Sen put the head of the National Military Police, General Sao Sokha, in charge of a special task force in January to root it out, placing a total ban on timber exports to Vietnam in the process. But Vietnamese customs data shows that many millions of dollars worth of timber continues to pour through.

Reporters visiting Cambodia's
Continued on page 2



Drills Highlight Deepest Chinese Military Ties in Years

Page 6

Internet Passes TV as Go-To News Source

By MATT SURRUSCO
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

The internet has for the first time surpassed television as the most important source of news about the country among Cambodians, according to a new study.

Thirty percent of respondents this year said the internet, and Facebook specifically, were their go-to news sources compared to 29 percent who said they got most

of their news from TV. Last year, a quarter of those surveyed cited the internet and social media as their key news sources, compared to about a third who still turned to TV first.

TV outlets in the country—all of which are operated by government officials, their family, or friends of the ruling party—have essentially “committed a suicide” by failing to broadcast quality

news, said Kounila Keo, a blogger and public policy scholar.

Cambodian TV “has not been able to deliver news besides ‘daily protocol news’ and pure entertainment programs,” Ms. Keo said.

TV viewers only see what state broadcasters air, while online “there are many more people who can broadcast information,” Javier Sola of the Open Institute, one of

Continued on page 7

AND ALSO

Minister Gets Given a Hard Time

REUTERS

A prominent Chilean business leader presented the country's economy minister with an inflatable doll on stage at an event late on Tuesday, sparking a social media storm and criticism by Chilean President Michelle Bachelet.

Exporters' association Asexma traditionally gives humorous gifts to VIPs attending its annual dinner, but the life-sized blow-up sex

doll—which was handed to Economy Minister Luis Céspedes with the comment that it could be used to “stimulate the economy”—backfired.

“The fight for respect for women has been an essential principle in my two governments,” Bachelet, Chile's first female leader, said in a post on Twitter. “What occurred at the Asexma dinner cannot be tolerated.”

Cut...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

border towns last week found the military playing middleman in the illicit trade—and taking a piece of the action in the process.

In Snuol, the motorbikes passing through town are not headed for the border itself. Before reaching the gate, they peel off onto dirt tracks on the left or right, making for back roads and fields where the illegal timber trade with Vietnam occurs just out of sight from the main road. Hardly a half-hour goes by without a few motorbikes sailing down the road with chunks of high-grade timber strapped to their back seats, some the size of an ice chest, others as long as a bed, balanced carefully in the middle like seesaws.

One black-market timber yard sits a half-dozen kilometers from the border, a few hundred meters off the main road along a dirt track that quickly turns from bad to worse. There, in an unmarked field, reporters saw hundreds of logs stacked in messy piles. More than a dozen men milled about waiting to make a sale. With them were some soldiers, part of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) Border Unit 204.

“We buy the wood and the Vietnamese come, and the Vietnamese take it to Vietnam,” said one of the soldiers, who declined to give his name or rank.

The logging of rare tree species has been against the law since at least 2002, the export of their logs since 1996. The government banned the export of all timber to

Vietnam outright, with the exception of finished products, in January.

“The wood is controlled by the provincial military commanders. The commanders under them sell it for money, and the money they get goes to every provincial level. The journalists get some money too,” the soldier went on. “I don't know why [journalists] get money. I just see the commanders come and give them money.”

The soldier, upset that foreigners had seen the timber yard, quickly stopped talking. Two other soldiers demanded that the reporters stop taking photos and delete any they had taken. They said the reporters were trespassing on military property and then refused to let them drive away, physically restraining one of their motorbike-taxi drivers.

They called their boss, who soon arrived in uniform in a Lexus SUV, a fat diamond-studded ring on his left hand.

Sok, who also declined to give his rank or his full name, said he was in command of the area and threatened to have the reporters arrested. “I can arrest all of you, no matter who you are, because you entered my military base,” he said.

His so-called base was completely unmarked; no wall, no fence, no sign, not so much as a guard post. Sok explained that the base was very new.

But the commander went on to confirm parts of what the other soldier had said.

“The soldiers buy wood from the local people and sell it to the Vietnamese,” he said. “The Vietnamese come to collect the wood from the base and take the wood to

NEWSMAKERS

■ Singer-songwriter STING and his wife TRUDIE STYLER hosted the biennial Rainforest Fund Benefit concert in New York on Wednesday, where BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN and IDINA MENZEL performed for environmental causes. The event celebrated a recent victory for Native Americans and environmentalists in which the federal government ruled against a pipeline project near the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota. Native American groups, activists, celebrities and U.S. armed forces had protested against the \$3.8 billion oil project, saying construction would damage sacred lands and any leaks could pollute the water supply. “We haven't won many arguments, those of us who have been in the environmental movement and human rights movement for many years,” Styler said. “I think Standing Rock really was the first gain ...and we have to make sure that we can now build on it.” (Reuters)

Vietnam.”

Sok urged the reporters to have sympathy for the poorly paid soldiers and made a final request. “If brother wants gas money, I can pay,” he said, using a common local euphemism for a small bribe. “But do not write about the wood

gion. It warned that replacement species such as Thngong were headed the same way.

Conservation groups blame the selective and often illegal poaching of such trees for helping open up protected areas to more widespread logging in Cambodia, which

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—SOLDIER,

ROYAL CAMBODIAN ARMED FORCES BORDER UNIT 204

brother saw on the military base.”

The base was not the only timber yard in the area doing illegal business with Vietnam.

Vuth Tha, a young man with a heavy piece of luxury-grade Thngong timber strapped to the back of his motorbike, had stopped last week on the side of the main road with about a half-dozen companions similarly loaded, taking a quick break before their final sprint.

He said they were headed for a nearby timber yard just behind the Heng Heng Casino—one of two within sight of Tumpeang Sre, the border gate at the end of the road—a few hundred meters from Vietnam.

“People come from Vietnam to buy the wood and they take it back [to Vietnam],” he said.

Prized for its deep red grain, Thngong is one of the rarest and most expensive tree species in Cambodia, worth tens of thousands of dollars per cubic meter in China, where much of the timber that Vietnam imports ends up. In a 2014 report, “Routes of Extinction,” the U.K.'s Environmental Investigation Agency said timber poachers feeding China's furniture market had brought the most prized local species of all, Kra Nhung, or Siamese Rosewood, to the edge of extinction across the Mekong re-

has experienced one of the highest rates of forest loss in the world over the past decade and a half.

Mr. Tha said he'd spent three days digging a Thngong tree stump out of the ground on his nearby farm to get his log. One of his companions said he bought his Thngong log for \$25 from “someone in a forest” in Mondolkiri province, about an hour's drive to the east, and was hoping to sell it behind the casino to a Vietnamese buyer for \$50. He said his profit would be minus the \$2.50 he paid to bribe police at a checkpoint to get here.

On the road back to Snuol town from the military base, Sok, the commander, pointed out a walled-off compound and said it was the timber depot of a local oknha, the royal title bestowed on wealthy businessmen who donate at least \$100,000 to the state. Oknha Leak, he said, built the depot only a few months ago and was using it to move high-grade wood from Mondolkiri and Ratanakkiri provinces. “Then he transports the wood to Vietnam,” Sok said. “But I don't know what checkpoints he uses.”

Local and national officials declined to discuss the timber trafficking along the border or largely denied it was happening.

Deputy district governor Sam Nal said he knew that “some soldiers” in

Continued on page 8

Correction: The article “CNRP Urges Patience as NEC Official's Verdict Gets Upheld” (December 15) mistakenly stated that Ny Chakrya was previously the head of rights group Adhoc. He was the group's head of monitoring. The same article incorrectly said that Seang Chet, an opposition commune chief, was facing charges of bribery when he was pardoned earlier this month. He had been convicted of bribery charges.

Correction: The article “In Cambodia, Adventure Tourism Finds Its Niche” (December 14) misstated the sponsor for DomRei Angkor's New Year's camping festival. Tuborg beer is sponsoring the event.

Cut...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

the area had been buying and selling logs in the past, but thought they had quit since the provincial governor ordered a crackdown on the timber trade early this year. He said he would tell the district governor about the base by the border and let him decide whether to investigate.

As for the steady stream of timber flowing through his district in broad daylight, Mr. Nal downplayed the scale of the problem.

"I've seen small vehicles carrying wood on the road sometimes, but we're not sure if it's going to Vietnam because we never follow them," he said. "We never see them taking luxury wood because Kratie has no luxury wood."

Meas Sopheap, the commander of the military's 204 Border Unit, hung up on a reporter when asked about his unit's role in the timber trade with Vietnam. The head of the province's military headquarters, Brigadier General Nay Toeung Loeng, said he had no idea that soldiers were trading timber.

"I think this information is not true because the economic police and military police are working to stop forest crime everywhere and they will crack down on any soldiers in the timber business," he said before hanging up.

Brigadier General San Bunthan, the province's military police commander, said he knew nothing about it and also hung up. Brigadier General Eng Hy, the voice of the government's latest crackdown on timber trafficking as spokesman for the National Military Police, said he did not believe what the reporters had seen, either.

"I don't think they are transporting and trading timber as openly as you say," he said. "I will send our forces to the base in Snuol and



A billboard in the center of Snuol town in Kratie province warns passersby of the theoretical consequences of illegal logging.

take action if we see any wood."

Since the crackdown started, the task force says it has seized more than 70,000 cubic meters of unlicensed wood, finding most of it inside the plantations and sawmills of wealthy businessmen. It has sent dozens of cases to provincial courts across the east, but after several months, not one of them has been charged, fueling speculation among conservation groups that the crackdown was meant more to settle individual turf wars than actually apply the law. The task force has not netted a single soldier, police officer or government official, and the seized timber has since been sold off to other wealthy businessmen.

In the past, the government has brushed off reports of soldiers and military police caught trafficking timber as the work of a few bad apples.

But the military's history in the country's timber trade is long and deep, and no group has done more to expose it than Global Witness, an NGO based in the U.K. that investigates the abuse of natural resources around the world.

"It is sadly not surprising that Cambodian soldiers continue to be involved in the illegal logging trade, as they have been for many years," said Alice Harrison, a spokeswoman for the group, which has helped chronicle Cambodia's timber racket for more than a decade.

"The tragedy is that little appears to have changed, and Cambodia now has one of the world's highest rates of deforestation."

Last year, Global Witness released "Taking a Cut," a damning report—hard copies were promptly seized by the government—detailing a network of state institu-

tions and top security officials greasing a thriving illegal logging trade in the Phnom Oral Wildlife Sanctuary in western Cambodia. It named a number of military units and ranking officers whose soldiers were seen logging illegally or moving illegally logged timber out of the area, and said the military police—under the command of Gen. Sokha, the head of the new task force—provided them protection down the supply chain.

In 2007, the NGO published "Cambodia's Family Tree," another report—also seized by the government—accusing several senior officials and their kin of operating a vast illegal logging syndicate. It called the army's Brigade 70 a "nationwide timber trafficking service" moving ill-gotten logs across the country. In last year's "The Cost of Luxury," Global Witness accused a Brigade 70 major general of working hand-in-hand with oknha and timber magnate Try Pheap to loot protected forests in the country's northeast.

"The anti-logging task force has had almost a full year to stop the illegal logging trade with Vietnam," Ms. Harrison said this week. "Last month's figures showing that the trade is still booming, plus the lack of convictions by the task force, expose it as yet another attempt by the Cambodian authorities to appear to be doing the right thing while destroying the country's forests for their own benefit."

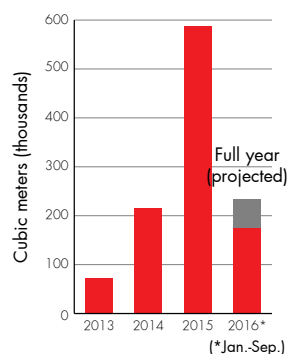
Those figures come from Vietnam's own customs authorities, and they say the scene in Snuol is being played out along much of



Enric Catala

A man drives a stack of high-grade timber through Snuol town toward the border with Vietnam last week.

Timber Exports Recorded by Vietnam



Source: Vietnamese customs data obtained by Forest Trends

the border.

The figures, obtained and shared by the U.S. advocacy group Forest Trends, suggests that Cambodia's timber export ban has made for less of a wall than a sieve, slowing down the traffic but hardly wiping it out. They show that 175,000 cubic meters of logs and—mostly—sawn wood worth a combined \$122 million made it into Vietnam between January and September.

At this rate, Cambodia's timber exports this year to Vietnam are set to top its exports in 2014. The exports briefly ballooned last year to nearly 590,000 cubic meters thanks to recent logging and trade restrictions in Burma, Laos and Thailand, making Cambodia Vietnam's No. 1 timber supplier by value for the first time in recent years.

In an interview with Channel News Asia a few months ago, Environment Minister Say Sam Al called the figures "groundless" and "falsified."

In an email this week, Forest Trends program manager Naomi Basik said the figures came straight from the Vietnamese government.

"We have every reason to believe that these data are accurate and that the system by which they are collected and shared are sound," she said.

Ms. Basik added that the gap between Vietnam's timber import figures and Cambodia's export figures as reported to the U.N. in recent years were "very large—too large to be attributed to simple fluctuations in exchange rates, differences in customs classifications or conversion factors" including, for example, switching measurements from weight to volume.

Vietnam's customs figures also show that the exports still include sizable volumes of high-grade timber, and that most of the wood is crossing at official border gates, including Tumpeang Sre in Snuol.

Almost as ubiquitous as the motorbikes passing through the district and stacked with timber are the vans, packed to the hilt with logs jutting out their backs, invariably hollowed out of all but the front seats to get the most out of every load and caked in dirt from their forays into the forest.

One afternoon last week, reporters watched a three-piece convoy head west from Snuol into Tbong Khmum province, where it passed Memot town and turned down a dirt road toward the Daun Roath border gate. There, on a side track of the tiny border town, a stone's throw from the gate, they unloaded in front of a few homes before starting the trip back.

A villager said the timber-laden trucks that used to rumble through to the border gate have vanished



Enric Catala

Top: Motorbike drivers haul pieces of wood along the main road between Snuol town in Kratie province and the Vietnamese border last week. Bottom: A van packed with logs parks before unloading near the Daun Roath border gate in Tbong Khmum province last week. Local villagers sell the logs to Vietnamese buyers across the border.

since the export ban was imposed in January. She said the packed vans, like this afternoon's, show up less now but still make regular deliveries.

"The wood goes across the border" to Vietnam, said the woman, who declined to give her name for fear of running afoul of local authorities. The drivers, she said, "sell the wood to the local people because the locals have customers from Vietnam.... They call the Vietnamese and they negotiate the price. A piece of Kra Nhung can cost \$10,000."

As in Snuol, local officials were in denial.

The deputy director of the province's economic crimes bureau, Phorn Sokpoeu, denied that vans were still moving high-grade timber to local border gates.

"We have never seen vehicles transporting luxury wood to the border because we have received strict orders from the provincial governor to stop the export of timber to Vietnam," he said.

Mr. Sokpoeu said he had heard that some villagers along the border were still moving some luxury timber into Vietnam, but had no idea where they were doing it.

"We will stop and arrest them if we see them crossing the border,"

he said.

Sambath, who plies the national highway between Kratie and Tbong Khmum in his share taxi almost daily, and also asked that his full name not be used for fear of authorities, said the packed vans were a regular sight.

"They transport timber every day," he said. "In the day and in the night."

Police manning the checkpoints in Snuol last week made no effort to block them.

"They stop them, but they stop them to take money from the drivers," Sambath said. "After they pay, they let them go."