Still Taking a Cut

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

BY ZSOMBOR 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 eager 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

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.

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

Drills Highlight Deepest Chinese Military Ties in Years

By 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.
Minister Gets Given a Hard Time

AND ALSO

The Cambodian Daily
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2016

A prominent Chilean business leader presented the country's economy minister with an inflatable doll on stage at an event last week 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)

Singer-songwriter STING and his wife TRUDIE STYLER hosted the biennial Rainforest Fund Benefit concert in New York on Wednesday, where<br>

IDINA MENZEL<br>
and her husband<br>

SOLDIER, Royal Cambodian Armed Forces Border Unit 204

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 unmapped; 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 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 of the land..."

Correction: The article “CNRP Urges Patience as NEC Official’s Verdict Upheld” (December 15) mistakenly stated that Ny Chakrya was 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 unmapped; 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 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 of the land...”

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Cut...

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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 Snoul and 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 institutions 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—accussing 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 Snoul is being played out along much of
The figures, obtained and shared by the U.S. advocacy group Forest Trends, suggest 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—to 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 Snoul.

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 Snoul 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 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 Snoul, 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 Snoul 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.”