
RI BULLETIN

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

November 9, 2004

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Cambodia: Protecting the Phnong

Despite a sharp rise in relief and development services in Cambodia's remote Mondulhiri province, the area's indigenous Phnong families are struggling to overcome problems ranging from traditional food shortages to new challenges to their land. To cope with economic growth and land speculation that threaten the farms and forests on which they depend for their livelihood, the Phnong will have to learn new farming techniques and land law at the same time.

The Phnong, who account for about three-quarters of Mondulhiri's population of 40,000, live simply in an area of steep hills and forested valleys close to the border with Vietnam. They grow rice and other crops on small plots they clear in dense woods, and they supplement what they grow with food and saleable products, such as resin, that they collect in the surrounding forests. Traditionally, they have moved their farms and sometimes their homes and villages every three to five years, as they depleted the fertility of the soil. They also own a variety of livestock, ranging from chickens to buffalo and elephants, that often wander freely in fields and forests.

With improving roads, people from other parts of Cambodia are beginning to move to Mondulhiri. A tourist industry is starting. Commercial logging is becoming more common. Corporations are buying land concessions and starting plantations of pine trees for resin, sometimes using herbicides to clear the land before planting.

While growth generates more day-labor opportunities for the Phnong, it is also threatening a livelihood that depends on easy access to large—and rotating—forest areas. Traditional Phnong life is beginning to change. Villagers used to live in thatched-roof bamboo huts that were often abandoned after approximately five years. These are being replaced with more permanent Cambodian style houses made entirely with wood, sometimes with tin roofs. Phnong villagers are beginning to worry about their ability to keep enough land and forest to maintain their farming, foraging and grazing practices.

But this year there is a more urgent problem: an unusually short wet season severely damaged local crops. A government official estimates that 3,000 of the 4,000 hectares farmed by the Phnong were damaged by the drought. This means that the Phnong have far less rice—their staple food—as well as beans, squash and corn than normal. Many families have already cut food consumption to two meals a day, and they worry about growing shortages. The UN World Food Program, which has provided rice to combat Phnong food emergencies in the past, is currently in a dispute with the Cambodian government over allegations of theft and sale of WFP rice. The WFP has suspended traditional food for work programs until it is repaid. Nevertheless, the WFP should consider food relief or school feeding programs for the Phnong.

Over the longer term, the Phnong need the opportunity to learn more productive farming and animal husbandry techniques that will increase food output for consumption as well as sale. Techniques are changing, but slowly. Cambodian Family Development Services, a local non governmental organization, is offering micro-loans to encourage crop diversification, but the drought has set the program back. International Cooperation Cambodia, another agency in the area, is offering animal husbandry education and veterinary services. But there are more opportunities for the introduction of cash crops, such as peanuts, cashews and soybeans.

Learning more productive techniques will become crucial to survival as development shrinks available land. Some villagers already complain that new settlers are demanding cash compensation for damage from wandering Phnong cattle. Improved education in Phnong villages is a key to managing change effectively, and educational opportunities are growing, particularly at the primary level.

Refugees International first became involved with the Phnong in 1999, when it helped 1,200 refugees return to their homes in Mondulhiri from Thailand. Those families, many headed by widows, had a difficult time re-establishing their farms. Over the years, RI has worked to generate WFP food and other support for the Phnong. A large influx of relief and development agencies, from two in 2001 to 15 now, has helped bring improvements in water quality, education, and health care, while allowing the Phnong to follow their traditional lifestyle and farming techniques.

The next step in protecting the Phnong as they slowly adapt to changes in their region is to assure that they have access to land. This will involve educating the Phnong in their private and communal rights to land under Cambodian law and insuring that their land rights are protected. This will not be easy in a country with little respect for rule of law. National and provincial officials have begun programs to define and protect Phnong land rights, but development is moving faster than the land rights programs.

In the face of current challenges, Refugees International recommends that:

- The World Food Program arrange an emergency food relief program to meet drought-related needs.
- Cambodian agricultural officials and development agencies focus on helping the Phnong improve agricultural productivity and introduce new crops. Irrigation, fertilization and the introduction of small machinery would all boost productivity.
- Government and private agencies pay greater attention to education at all grade levels, particularly for girls.
- The Royal Government of Cambodia move quickly to define and protect Phnong land rights.
- Private human and legal rights agencies devise programs to help the Phnong defend their rights.
- International donors help the Phnong build a cultural center that will preserve and illustrate aspects of Phnong life threatened by development and modernization. Newly crowned King Sihamoni, who once represented Cambodia at UNESCO, could be an influential supporter.

RI President Ken Bacon and Development Associate Ghazal Vaghedi are in Cambodia.