

**9 August 2012**

**Op-Ed**

**Empowering indigenous voices**

**By James Heenan**

Armed only with courage and solidarity with their fellow Phnong indigenous communities, villagers in Bousra commune Mondulkiri march to the private company that was granted an economic land concession for a rubber plantation on their traditional land. Facing company officials, their collective voices make clear demands of the company: “We came here to take back our land. You use poverty to do your business, but you are taking the land that is rightfully ours”.

The calls for change of this Phnong community are representative of a growing worldwide movement of indigenous peoples now more aware of their rights to preserve their culture, land, language and religion. This phenomenon is built on a long struggle for the recognition of the human rights of indigenous peoples, which resulted in the adoption five years ago of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration, for which 143 member States voted in favour in 2007 (including Cambodia), represents the culmination of decades of advocacy for indigenous peoples’ rights and lays out explicitly rights to land, culture, livelihood and consultation, among other things. With this global recognition of their rights in hand, indigenous communities have made remarkable achievements in identifying as a community, organising, educating, and - in claiming their rights - successfully putting their interests on the agenda.

Today, International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, we celebrate these achievements.

As examples like the activism of the indigenous in Bousra, the community patrolling in Prey Long forest and the success of the Suoy people in securing protection of 3,000 hectares of forest in Kampong Speu show, Cambodia is no exception to this trend. With over 100,000 indigenous people spread across 15 provinces in 24 different groups, the Kingdom possesses a rich indigenous diversity. In common with indigenous peoples around the world, the communities’ relationship with their traditional lands underpins their identity as indigenous. Safeguarding ancestral lands is rooted in indigenous peoples’

reverence for nature and dependence on their land's resources for life sustenance. Article 10 of the UN Declaration prohibits the forcible removal of indigenous from their lands and territories, and prevents relocation from taking place without the free, prior, and informed consent including fair and just compensation of all affected peoples. In Cambodia today, as in many other countries, indigenous communities are disproportionately impacted by widespread and chronic land conflicts. These land disputes threaten indigenous peoples with displacement and put their livelihoods at risk. They can also show disregard for cultural heritage, religion and spirituality, and could ultimately risk the loss of ethnic diversity.

Of the 63 land disputes in which OHCHR was called for assistance in the past year, 20% related to indigenous land, despite the fact that indigenous communities represent 1% of Cambodia's population.

The legal framework for protecting the land of indigenous peoples adopted by the Royal Government is, however, well-developed. In comparison with other countries, indigenous peoples in Cambodia have a relatively clear, if arduous, process to follow that allows them to be recognized as an indigenous community, to be registered as a legal entity and to claim communal title over their traditional lands. Communal title is the communities' strongest means to resist land grabbing. Along with many other donor-supported projects, OHCHR together with the Government, the ILO and civil society is assisting seven Phnong communities in Bousra commune in Mondulkiri and five Suoy communities in Kampong Speu in this process. Experience shows this process also serves to educate indigenous communities of their rights, reinforce their cohesion and bolster solidarity with other communities whose lands are threatened by various forms of land grabbing.

The greater organisation of indigenous communities to claim their rights has been supported in many parts of the world by a growth in indigenous media, particularly radio and drama. Indigenous media, which is the theme of this year's International Day, can be powerful tools for claiming human rights and mainstreaming indigenous voices in the broader community. They serve as a means not only for indigenous communities to draw attention to violations of their rights, but just as importantly to highlight the daily examples of small victories won by indigenous communities in defence of their rights.

While indigenous media in Cambodia are in their infancy, mainstream media also have a role to play. On this International Day, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon called on "Member States and the mainstream media to create and maintain opportunities for indigenous peoples to articulate their perspectives, priorities

and aspirations". Such an opportunity has been created by the Royal Government which, in collaboration with UNESCO, provides radio broadcasts in Ratanakiri province in the indigenous languages Kroeung, Tumpoun, Prov, and Jarrai. More such initiatives, particularly indigenous-owned and managed media, can only but bolster the voice of indigenous communities in Cambodia in claiming their rights.

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