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The Disappearance of Boeung Kak Lake: Whose Sacrifice, For Whom

The view from a Chinese Researcher

Sept 2014

Boeung Kak used to be a beautiful lake in Phnom Penh. In 2007, the Cambodian government made an agreement with a company to lease the land to the company for 99 years. This agreement has resulted in the filling of the lake with sand in order for the company to build on the land. The Lake was 328 acres in size, which can support tens thousands of citizens if it is transformed to land. It seemed to be a reasonable sacrifice for the city in landscape.

In fact, other cities paid heavy price of landscape for development. For instance, the 24km long Beijing City Wall, which stood for 530 years, was demolished to make room for the 2nd Ring Road and the Line 2 of Beijing Subway in 1964. It was controversial at that time. But now, most of tourists coming to Beijing are not conscious of the existence of the previous City Wall.

It is the same with the Boeung Kak Lake. Visitors to Phnom Penh will forget it within few years. They may enjoy themselves in the restaurants and five-star hotels built on the former lake at that time. However, many people will suffer from this project for years or even generations. They are the people who used to live with the Lake.

More than 4,000 families living around the Lake had to abandon their houses because of the project. They were offered three choices: US\$8,500; resettlement 20 kilometers outside of Phnom Penh or a flat on the onsite development in five years in addition to US\$500.

Are those good choices for villagers? It is hard to say, for every family has its own condition. Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT), a local NGO, made interviews with some affected people. As to the first and second choices, one man said that the US\$8,500 was adequate compensation for him, for he only had a wood house. But it was inadequate for richer people. As to the relocation sites in Damnak Troyung, he said, some people are satisfied while most are not. It seems that the relocation sites are not as bad as some NGOs claimed. At least the basic infrastructures, such as roads, hospitals and schools are available. The last choice, which provides new residence onsite five years later, sounds good, many villagers said, but there are not many details about the plan. Some people wonder what kind of houses they can get five years later. What is more, they don't believe that the government and the company will keep their word. As a result, around 3,000 families refused

to move.

One thing for sure is that the project affects people's lives deeply. First, if people move out of the city, it will be harder for them to find livelihoods. Some families did business, for example, running a hotel or shop in their original houses. What they lost was much more than US\$8,500. Second, villagers cannot have access to good medical service and education. Third, for poor villagers, with only US\$8,500, can never buy a house within the town. They can only rent a flat or giving up opportunities in town.

Violent eviction followed the rejection of the undue compensation. The company started to pump sand into the lake in 2008. Villagers started to fight back. We could hear the news about the protests for the land rights every month and witnessed the marches in front of the Independent Monument, the City Hall, the Court of Appeals and the World Bank in the next several years. The affected residents protested for due compensation, cease of violent evictions and release of peaceful protestors.

With the efforts of villagers, NGOs and global society, things took a turn for better. Firstly, the World Bank stated in 2010 that it would not resume the loans to Cambodia until the conflict over the land and the eviction of people has been resolved. Secondly, the government gave the choice to affected villagers to move back after five years. Thirdly, The Boeung Kak 13, a group of women that are working as an opposition to the lease of Boeung Kak Lake and the evictions of the people, was released after they were sentenced to jail for two years. Fourthly, the Cambodian government issued a sub-decree granting title to the remaining 800 families over 12.44 hectares of residential land in the Boeung Kak area. By the end of December 2011, more than 500 families had received titles.

However, all these success did not stop the lake from turning into construction field. By now, Phnom Penh has lost Boeung Kak Lake completely. Besides affecting the lives of people living around the Lake, the disappearance of the Lake also has large potential influence on the environment.

Boeung Kak Lake played an important role in reducing storm runoff for the areas surrounding the Lake in Phnom Penh. Lakes and rivers could serve as important resources for wastewater and storm water drainage. Additionally, lakes can decrease the pollution within cities. During the monsoon season, the lakes can retain the water, reducing the frequency of floods within the town.

Phnom Penh should learn lessons from another city in China. Wuhan, one of the biggest cities in China, is located by Changjiang River. It used to be crowned as the City of Lakes for its 127 natural lakes. But now the number has been reduced to 38 for constructing commercial buildings, leaving the city suffering from waterlogging every summer. As a result, the government has decided to dig

artificial lakes to deal with the problem now.

With affected villagers and the city suffering, some other people get tons of benefits. Shukaku Inc., the company that got the land concession on Boeung Kak Lake, is controlled by CPP Senator Lao Meng Khin. This point is emphasized by almost every report on this issue.

Mr. Lao is powerful enough to get the land but not rich enough to develop it on his own. Shukaku Inc. made a deal with Erdos Hongjun Investment Corporation, a Chinese deep pocket, to help out with the building projects on the newly gained land. They formed a joint venture to develop the land. But the Chinese company pulled out this year (July, 2014), leaving Shukaku Inc. without enough financial support. However, a Singaporean listed company, HLH Group, dabbled in the former lake in a different way recently. It entered a \$14.9 million purchase deal with Shukaku Inc. in June for 1.3 hectares of land to develop it by itself. As a result, the protestors transferred from the Chinese Embassy to the Singaporean one.

The Boeung Kak Lake case reflects serious land issues in Cambodia in the past decade. The government has signed off almost two-thirds of Cambodia's arable land to Chinese and Vietnamese companies and local firms with ties to powerful officials. While the people who lost their land suffer, some others are getting richer and richer. I think that is the reason why the luxury carmaker Rolls Royce is eager to open its showroom in Cambodia, one of world's poorest countries.

Deng Xiaoping, the former Chinese leader, told his country a generation ago: "Let some people get rich first." It unshackled China's economy and created the fast growth in the past three decades. But it only works well on the premise that other people will not get poorer in the meantime. Last but not the least, Cambodians have suffered enough from Khmer Rouge. They do not deserve more pains.

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<http://saveboeungkak.wordpress.com>

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A corner of Boeung Kak (Sep 11th, 2014)



The change of Boeung Kak Lake (from Google Earth)



There are roads and telegraph poles in Boeung Kak now (Sep 11th, 2014)



From <http://saveboeungkak.wordpress.com/about-the-save-boeung-kok-campaign/>