

To those who are may or may not have heard about the protests of the tens of thousands of Cambodians in Siemreap and around Angkor Wat, here is the background story.

Tens of thousands of Cambodians living around Angkor Wat have been protesting upon hearing that they are going to be among the people who will be evicted from their lands.

The government of Cambodia is planning to evict tens of thousands of Cambodians from the surroundings of Angkor Wat without adequate compensation nor resettlement to the benefit of a few of the oligarchs and cronies connected to the ruling party.

Some of the government's (official) pretexts: they want to beautify the area and to prevent an overpopulation that will overuse the scarce water.

It is an established fact that the Angkor temples are highly dependent on water surrounding it to maintain its structural stability and integrity.

In 2019, Siemreap welcomed 2.6 M visitors a year (1). The government is expecting the number of visitors to triple once the Siemreap Airport is completed.

However, the whole province has only a population of 800,000 , and Siemreap the capital city, has only 135,000 (2). The people have lived there for hundreds of years. There have been no problems of water overuse, not from the Barays water reservoirs, nor from the Siemreap river, nor from the underground water table until all these new hotels, these millions of visitors, these new developments and the retention of water from the Mekong by Chinese dams upstream, started to affect the level of the water table and water supply.

Clearly, the cause of the overuse of water are the millions of visitors and the hotels and new housings and deforestation.

The government's plan to increase revenue through tourism and development through sacrificing its people, is unsustainable because it has no plan to address the water shortage resulting from the millions of visitors, and the evicted people will only be replaced by more numerous wealthier homeowners and hotels.

The people have land and ownership rights. Hun Sen is using the pretext of "development" and is using eminent domain powers to grab the people's land to benefit private investors, not for the benefit of the state of the community.

Learning from his past experiences with the Boeung Kak Lake, Borey Keyla and the Kok Kong, Hun Sen is now sending his high level officials and military to sweet-talk the people into accepting the meager settlement with threats, misinformation and verbal promises that he has no intention of keeping.

For example, the people are told that they either accept this meager compensation or continue to fight and end up getting nothing.

Some people who accepted the settlement of a “poverty certificate” (4) found out that they were paid only approximately \$9.00 (37,500 riels) per person for property that is worth hundreds of thousands.

Hun Sen is evicting the people because he had made a non-transparent deal with the infamous NagaCorp CEO and Casino owner, Dr Chen to let him build an entertainment/ water park complex and a Chinatown within a short distance of the temples. The lease deal he gave to NagaCorp (without public bidding) was way lower than the worth of this prime property, just steps from a World Heritage site (An average of \$445,000 a year for 75 hectares, twice the size of Disneyland for 50 years.)(3). Even though the Apsara authorities overseeing the preservation of the Angkor park, Unesco and the ministry of culture opposed the initial plan in 2021, NagaCorp’s non-executive director and chairman Timothy Patrick McNally had indicated already that NagaCorp will keep looking for nearby alternatives.

In the meantime, all the donors countries must withhold all development aid to Apsara and the ICC - Angkor until the Council of Development for Cambodia headed by Hun Sen, makes public all agreements and amendments it has made with NagaCorp and other developers, as well reveal as any long term environmental and structural impact studies on the Temples performed.

In the meantime, all plans for evictions must stop until a comprehensive census and study of the population affected by the overall development plan for the whole province is performed, and concrete, binding agreements for resettlement and compensation are freely accepted by the people, and the government and the developers have shown the establishment of a sufficient compensation fund that they cannot renege on.

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1) - <https://m.phnompenhpost.com/business/angkor-hosts-26m-visitors>

The Angkor Archaeological Park welcomed nearly 2.6 million international visitors last year, generating more than \$100 million in revenue, a statement from the state-run Angkor Enterprise released on Tuesday said.

The park saw a 5.45 per cent rise in visitors to 2.59 million from last year, while revenue from ticket sales jumped eight per cent, generating \$116.64 million.

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