

[Train in the Distance: Nong Waeng and the Future of Railside Slums](#)

<https://vimeo.com/27991255>

[YouTube Version](#)

KHON KAEN – On January 5, 2011, Mr. Rangsan Khachen was reading his morning newspaper when he spotted his community's name. Nong Waeng, his home of ten years, he read, could soon be transformed into a train station on a high-speed railway from northeastern Nong Khai, on the border of Laos, down to southern Padang Besar which borders Malaysia.

Though a new government has been elected since high-speed [rail talks began](#) last autumn, the construction of a countrywide high-speed rail system remains on the table. The \$320 billion joint enterprise between Thailand and China will increase tourism and trade, especially for Northeastern rice farmers, [claimed](#) former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. But as plans for construction of the line from Nong Khai to Bangkok move forward, little has been done to safeguard the rights of hundreds of railside slums in Thailand that may soon be evicted to make way for new rails.

Since the rapid urbanization that swept Thailand in the 1950s, 246 communities of rural migrants have settled in slums within 40 meters of the railway on land owned by the State Railway of Thailand (SRT). In the past 50 years, only 46 have procured legal land leases. Nong Waeng is one railside community that has fought for a land lease and won, just in time to steer clear of eviction.

Nong Waeng was founded over twenty-five years ago by rural migrants looking for work in the growing city of Khon Kaen. As

buildings sprung up, opportunities for labor abounded. Though the rural laborers who flocked to the city could find plenty of work, few could find affordable housing options. As a result, many chose to settle along the railway. Today, Nong Waeng is one of 22 railside slum communities in Khon Kaen city alone.

Over the past twenty years, Nong Waeng has shown dedication to procuring rights for running water, electricity, and most recently a land lease. In March of this year, after years of preparation, their [proposal for a land lease](#) was finally accepted.

For the remaining 200 railside communities in Thailand without a lease, however, news of the high-speed rail comes as a rude awakening. Construction on the rails from Nong Khai to Bangkok are likely to [begin in 2012](#), leaving Northeastern communities with only a few months to prepare. While some may try to petition for a lease of their own, their time is limited and their future still uncertain.

To learn more about the story of Nong Waeng, watch the video above.