

Slum Granted Lease by SRT

KHON KAEN – Community leaders, local politicians, and villagers met today to mark the start of a land rental agreement between the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) and the inhabitants of the Nong Waeng slum community. The agreement comes just five months after parliament approved plans to move ahead with the Chinese-Thai joint high-speed rail venture.

With 180 billion baht tentatively allocated for the Nong Khai-Bangkok line, the stakes have been raised for rail-side communities to lease their land or move before construction begins. The people of Nong Waeng have been awarded their lease just in time and now, for the first time in the settlement's lifetime, its residents of laborers, scavengers, and vendors will have legal access to basic utilities.

Over a generation ago, the earliest inhabitants of Nong Waeng were lured to Khon Kaen by Bangkok-based development initiatives, but were left without affordable housing options and settled along the railway. For the last 50 years, the community has squatted on the SRT-owned land, fearing eviction and rerouting water and electricity from neighbors at inflated prices. On April 1, residents will begin legally leasing land from the SRT and paying for their utilities at market rates.



On behalf of Nong Waeng, Prayad Karnplook (left) accepts the agreement from MP Prajak Klaewklarharn.

While today's ceremony could easily have been described as a celebration, complete with traditionally-costumed schoolchildren and the familiar thump of Thai pop-music, community leader Prayad Karnplook was quick to dispel any

misconceptions. "This is only the beginning," he said. "It will be a celebration when everyone has finally settled down in the new location and the utilities are up and running."

Mr. Prayad's pragmatism is, perhaps, well founded. The imminent infrastructural improvements require relocating the entire community across the tracks and a few kilometers away. The move will be cumbersome and, some claim, underfunded. An as-of-yet unscheduled appraisal of each home's value by government inspectors will net each family anywhere from 20 to 40 thousand baht per house, a sum of money one villager described as "definitely not enough." Furthermore, there is some restrained skepticism surrounding the duration of the lease the SRT has granted them, a skepticism that MP Prajak Klaewklarharn sought to dismiss in his address to community members this morning.

"Even though the lease is three years, it can be renewed," the Bhum Jai Thai party member and former transportation secretary said. "Three years and then another three years – I expect that in 20 years the community will be in the same place."

Mr. Prajak's reassurance, however, is complicated by the recent lease agreement signed by the leaders of nearby Pornsawan, another community alongside the train tracks. The villagers there were granted a 30 year lease for their land. A representative from the Four Regions Slum Network, an NGO that helped both communities get their leases, was not surprised. Ghakagapong Buripla explained that Pornsawan is located on land that the SRT is certain they'll never want to further develop. Nong Waeng, on the other hand, will have to wait and see.

And yet, despite the lingering doubts and concerns, Mr. Ghakagapong has reasons to be hopeful. Of the 13 Khon Kaen slum communities allied with his organization, 12 have been granted leases by the SRT and so far, things have gone smoothly. "I'm quite pleased with the people who have gathered

together to get this land,” he said about today’s accomplishment. They’ve assured the “basic rights of citizens.”

Ministers Discuss Land Deed with Chaiyaphum Protest Villagers



Officials from the office of the Prime Minister and members of Forest Industry Organization (FIO) talk to villagers in Baw Kaew.

BAW KAEW VILLAGE, CHAIYAPHUM—Officials from the office of the Prime Minister travelled to Baw Kaew protest village yesterday morning to meet with villagers and Forest Industry Organization (FIO) members about their overlapping claims to 1,500 rai of land in Kon San Forest.

Today marked a small victory in a 33-year uphill battle for Baw Kaew villagers as government officials finally described the potential boundaries of the Community Land Deed that the villagers have long pursued.

Their battle began in 1978 when the state owned FIO declared ownership over 4,401 rai for a eucalyptus plantation known as the Kon San Forest Project. With little warning, the commercial forestry developers ordered the eviction of more than 1,000 inhabitants. Though some remained in their homes, almost all lost the land their families had been farming for generations.

Through decades of disorganized protests, dispersed villagers struggled to make their voices heard. Then, in early 2009, 100 farmers banded together with the Land Reform Network of Thailand (LRNT), an NGO dedicated to helping communities fight for land rights. With the increased leadership and political affiliations of the organization, the farmers could reel in support from across nine different FIO-displaced villages.

That July, with the help of the LRNT, 169 families illegally resettled in Kon San forest and founded the Baw Kaew protest village to call attention to their cause. Since then, they have been petitioning for a Community Land Deed entitling them to share 1,500 rai, a fraction of the total land they had lost. Yesterday's gathering offered them a glimpse of success.

"I'm pleased with today's meeting," said Poon Ponsuwan, a leader of the Baw Kaew community. "We hope to get the land deed within the month."

However, the villagers may still have a long battle ahead of them. Phaithoon Seerord, the Head of the Working Committee on Community Land Deeds, encouraged the FIO and villagers to resolve their differences, but acknowledged that the timeline for the land deed is still unknown.

"The FIO can be an obstacle because they aren't giving the land to the farmers. It isn't possible for us to overrule the FIO, but we can ask them to help by changing their policies," Phaithoon told reporters.

In order for the Community Land Deed to move forward, the FIO must agree to give up the land. An FIO representative present at the meeting stated that the matter would be discussed with the leaders of the organization and that they would report back to the villagers soon.

Only one day after a month-long land rights rally in Bangkok concluded, Baw Kaew villagers expressed mixed expectations. Many inhabitants were pleased with the ministers' presence and

believed it was a sign of official recognition of their rights.

“This is the first time that people from the government have come here. Before that, the FIO never spoke with us. This is the first signal of hope,” said Nulek, a 48 year-old farmer with three children in school.

Yet others are still hesitant to celebrate. Ang Dechasaroong, 60, said, “I’m happy but I don’t have a lot of confidence. I’m tired of hearing them talk.”
