

Urban poor uniting across borders

Members of a Thai 'slum network' are feeling empowered and expressing solidarity with their counterparts in Cambodia, the Philippines and beyond

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The heat and humidity in Bangkok on Oct 4 couldn't deter the throng of 2,000 members of the Four Regions Slum Network (FRSN) who gathered in front of the Unescap headquarters in Bangkok to commemorate World Habitat Day by submitting a letter to a United Nations representative. The letter demands that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon meet with and listen to the problems of poor people around Boeung Kak Lake in Phnom Penh when he visits Cambodia Oct 27-28. He will also be in Bangkok briefly on Tuesday the 26th. The UN's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is intended to address the problems of the urban poor (see box).

Why were these poor urban Thais who have organised the FRSN network concerned about people in Cambodia? The answer is a growing solidarity among slum dwellers and homeless people that transcends national boundaries.

"We, the poor, have nothing but our hearts to help our friends who are encountering problems similar to those many of us have _ in this case forced eviction," said Nuchanart Taenthong, a core member of the FRSN. The FRSN has been organising and networking with local and international groups for more than a decade to secure basic rights for the urban poor. Chief among these is adequate and secure housing.

Mrs Nuchanart and other members of the FRSN learned about the plight of their Cambodian counterparts who live on and around Boeung Kak Lake, a swampy lowland area in the middle of Phnom Penh where many refugees returning to the city after the Khmer Rouge era built houses and new lives. Now the government wants them to leave their homes to make way for a commercial development by a private company which has obtained a 99-year land concession.

"We have learned from friends in our international networks that many of the people around the lake are in big trouble. The company has filled in the lake, and many houses are becoming submerged," said Mrs Nuchanart, adding that this is the reason why her local network has mobilised members to urge Mr Ban to look into the situation. Mrs Nuchanart explained that the FRSN wants to show the public a different side of the urban poor. When they get organised, they are neither selfish nor obsessed with their own problems, such as high levels of addiction to illegal drugs. "We know the value of helping others," she said.

Pratin Wekhawarkyanon, a former FRSN chairperson, said: "We can understand their [the Boeung Kak Lake slum dwellers'] predicament. Many of them have been living there for 20 to 30 years, but the investors in the project have done nothing to provide them with adequate resettlement or fair compensation. We call on Mr Ban to meet with the people of Boeung Kak Lake and with relevant civil society organisations to discuss human rights violations and help find a means to address their problems." Mrs Pratin also visited people who are affected by the development project in Cambodia last month.

Sangwien Nuchthien, another FRSN leader, attended a simultaneous function to commemorate World Habitat Day in Manila, the Philippines, a workshop titled Leaders Assembly on Anti-Eviction, organised by Leaders and Organisers of Community Organisations in Asia (LOCOA). After a discussion of the problems with residents of Boeung Kak Lake, some of whom also attended the workshop, Mr Sangwien said that he could see they are encountering problems similar to those plaguing the urban poor in Thailand a few decades ago under a dictatorship and economic hardships.

"When we got organised we were able to regain our rights and our dignity," said Mr Sangwien. "I want to urge our Cambodian friends to unite to fight for their housing rights," he added.

Be Pharom, one of the Boeung Kak Lake residents who participated in the Leaders Assembly, said she felt very grateful for the support of her counterparts in Thailand, which she learned of through FRSN members in Manila. "There are not enough words for me to thank my Thai urban poor brothers and sisters for their actions of international solidarity," she said upon learning about the mass mobilisation in Bangkok and the demand for the UN secretary-general to meet the residents of Boeung Kak Lake.

Be Pharom was born in Cambodia's rural Kandal province and moved to Phnom Penh to look for a job in 1994. After many years of renting a room for herself and her family she collected enough money to buy a small house on the lake. It cost the entire family savings, plus more to renovate, but said Be Pharom: "It's priceless because it is our house." She and her friends around the lake learned about the eviction plan when the private investor started pumping sand into the lake to fill it in. At the time there were more than nine villages around the lake with around 4,000 families. After eviction notices were given last year there are only about 2,600 families remaining. They have chosen not to passively accept the government-backed project, and they are making their own demands. Some want land title documents, while some are in favour of a land-share arrangement with the government contributing to on-site development. In the event that they must move, they want fair financial compensation.

Be Pharom said she and her friends have employed all means allowed under Cambodian law to exercise their rights, but for the most part their demands have been ignored and security forces have dealt harshly with them.

"Many times when we gathered, we were met with violent suppression," she said, adding that they have also had no chance to submit a petition directly to Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Under Cambodian law gatherings of more than 200 people are not allowed. Because of the many restrictions in Cambodia, the leaders from communities in seven countries in Asia who were present at the LOCOA workshop in Manila came to the conclusion that international urban activist groups need to pay attention to the eviction situation in Cambodia and lend their support.

"I have learned of many poignant situations in the Philippines, such as the threat to evict people at Estero de San Miguel [a notorious slum along the banks of the San Miguel River] which would affect some 3,700 families, and the forced eviction at Radial Road 10 [R-10], which affects some 2,000 families, but I think the situation in

the Philippines is still better than in Cambodia," said Boonsong Moya, a slum leader from Khon Kaen province who also attended the workshop.

Mr Boonsong noted that new Philippines President Benigno Aquino III is receptive to the problems of the urban poor and has promised to hold a dialogue with them.

"Moreover, our Filipino friends have gotten somewhat organised. They live under a democratic society where they can exercise their rights. I think they are in a better position [than in Cambodia] and I hope that the president will listen to their proposals about on-site development," said Mr Boonsong.

He has lived on land belonging to the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) for more than three decades, since he was very small, and he says he can feel the pain of people who don't own land. "My parents felt insecure about living on state land, but they had no choice if they wanted to feed me and my siblings. Without cheap housing, how could we survive on a very low income?" he asked.

After he joined the FRSN movement, said Mr Boonsong, he could "feel the power" of collective rights and knowledge.

"I have learned so many things. I know my rights and the power of accurate information, which can help us in negotiating with the authorities," he said. In fact, his community was able to negotiate the lease of the land from the SRT.

Mr Boonsong said that during his visit to the Philippines he became aware that urban poor people everywhere need to learn from each other and unite.

He expressed admiration for the efforts of the urban poor in the Philippines to stand up for their rights.

"I think that if people in the Estero de San Miguel communities hadn't gotten organised and developed clear demands and proposals, they would have no right to negotiate with their government," he said.

Filomena Cinco, a community leader at Estero de San Miguel, explained how she and other community members had tried to involve other sectors in their struggle and give them an understanding of what it is like to live in the shanties. "We were able to connect with a group of architects led by Palafox Associates who came to study our area. They came up with a plan in which on-site development is possible," she said. The architects designed three-storey residential buildings along the river with substantial facilities for the slum dwellers. The government is considering the plan. Meanwhile, people in the area have agreed to help clean up the river.

"Nobody wants to stay on the squatters' land, but we are forced to do so by many factors," said Ms Cinco, who has made the Estero her home for more than two decades. She comes from Tumauini in the northern province of Isabela. She was schooled in Manila and came back to look for a teaching job. She had to support her mother and four siblings back home and therefore had to find cheap housing. When she had a family of her own, one of her children had special needs and she quit her job to take care of him. Later her husband fell ill and lost his job.

Now the owner of the land wants to develop it and is trying to evict all the residents. She has proposed a relocation site in Caluan, Laguna province which is about three hours by car.

"According to the model of the relocation houses we have seen, they are not equipped with basic services," said Ms Cinco, adding that the relocation site is also far from sources of employment.

The urban poor in Manila have long encountered forced evictions and threats of evictions, but most interviewed at the LOCOA workshop said they feel their Cambodian counterparts are faced with much greater troubles.

"We want to support their struggles, I don't want them to be like us," said Prescilda Juanich, the chairwoman of a group of affected people at Navotas community in the R-10 slum, where the authorities forced eviction of some residents for a road-widening project.

Ms Juanich says she was forced to leave her home at R-10 without proper compensation or resettlement arrangements. She and other members of her group watched as the houses where they had lived all their lives were torn down in the name of progress.

"There is no justice and no place for the poor in what the rich call a 'civilised' society. The government treated us as garbage that could be swept and dumped anywhere it wanted," said Ms Juanich.

The 400 affected families protested by camping out in front of two government agencies for more than a month, from March to April this year. Because of their mass action, the agencies agreed to provide the relocation site for them.

But Ms Juanich said the San Isidro Montalban relocation site is more than two hours away by bus and requires four connections. To commute to and from Manila costs the residents 120 pesos a day, an expense they can scarcely afford: "I wonder why this is still happening in my country, violently and forcibly evicting poor families for the sake of what they call development. Is this the kind of development they want? They force poor families to be homeless."

Obligations under UN Covenant

The United Nations has designated the first Monday of October every year as World Habitat Day. The idea is to reflect on the state of towns and cities and the basic right of all to adequate shelter.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's statement for 2010 World Habitat Day reads in part: "With the theme _ Better City, Better Life _ this year's observance highlights the actions and policies that can improve well-being for the billion people who live in slums and other sub-standard housing around the world."

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) seeks to address the problems of the urban poor. As of December, 2008, the covenant had 160 parties, including Cambodia (May 26, 1992), the Philippines (June 7, 1974), the Republic of Korea (April 10, 1990) and Thailand (Sept 5, 1999).

Article 11 of the covenant defines the right to adequate housing as "the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity". This requires "adequate privacy, adequate space, adequate security, adequate lighting and ventilation, adequate basic infrastructure and adequate location with regard to work and basic facilities _ all at a reasonable cost".

General Comment 7 (Article 11.1 of the covenant) says that the international community has long recognised that the issue of forced evictions is a serious one and notes that in 1976 the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements concluded that "undertaking major clearance operations should take place only when conservation and rehabilitation are not feasible and relocation measures are made".

Agenda 21 states that "people should be protected by law against unfair eviction from their homes or land".

General Comment 7 (Article 13) states that "parties shall ensure, prior to carrying out any evictions, and particularly those involving large groups, that all feasible alternatives are explored in consultation with the affected persons, with a view to avoiding, or at least minimising, the need to use force.

"Legal remedies or procedures should be provided to those who are affected by eviction orders. State parties shall also see to it that all the individuals concerned have a right to adequate compensation for any property, both personal and real, which is affected."