

# New forestland resolution 'old wine in new bottle'

ACTIVISTS SAY MOVE TO TACKLE ENCROACHMENT  
'RETAINS FLAWS OF PREVIOUS MITIGATION MEASURES'

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THE NATION

THE GOVERNMENT'S measures to tackle the problems over forest communities, which are outlined in a new Cabinet resolution, are deeply flawed, say representatives of forest dwellers.

The Cabinet on Tuesday approved five new forestland management plans and measures to tackle forest encroachment.

But prominent land rights activists and local people who have been affected by disputes over forestlands, yesterday said the new measures barely improved on ineffective previous measures.

The new Cabinet resolution will not make any difference, they said.

According to the Cabinet, the resolution was intended to settle land disputes between the authorities and local forest communities, as well as stop further encroachment into the forest by setting up a new land management framework.

Under the new approach, the people who lived on forestlands before June 30, 1998 will be granted a conditional com-

munal land deed to ensure their rights over the land, but are not allowed to sell or transfer their land deeds to others.

However, prominent land rights activist and Green Party leader Pongsa Chunam said the new approach retains many of the problematic issues plaguing the previous forestland dispute mitigation measures. Still at risk are the livelihoods of more than 17 million people who are the original inhabitants of the conserved forests and national parks.

## Inaccurate land survey

Pongsa used the land survey issue as an example to demonstrate that the survey of boundaries between the people's land and forestland was again performed by officials without the participation of local people. Thus the problems of an inaccurate survey and disputed land boundaries have been carried over into the new resolution.

Like the Cabinet resolution of June 1998, the latest iteration "fails to provide concrete protection to the people who originally lived in the forests before the

proclamation of conserved forests and national parks," said Pongsa. "So they are still at risk of being the victims of enforced eviction by the authorities under the NCPO's [National Council for Peace and Order] forestland reclamation policy."

Kanya Pankitti, a People's Movement for a Just Society activist, added that the land-use limitations and conditions for the people allowed to live on forestlands, were both unclear and in conflict with people's livelihoods.

The new Cabinet resolution requires that forest communities allocate a part of their land to grow the forest. Kanya, who is among those affected by a land dispute with Khaopu Khaoya National Park in Trang province, said that this rule had not been clearly written. People fear that a large part of their land will be appropriated for reforestation, with insufficient land left for them to farm and economically sustain their families.

She is also concerned about the risk of enforced evictions. Even though many communities in Khaopu Khaoya National Park were founded before it was declared a national park, many families had already been evicted from their lands, as well as sued under forest encroachment charges as part of the NCPO's forestland reclamation policy.

Meanwhile, Royal Forest Department director-general Athapol Charoenshunsu confirmed that local people would be involved in forestland dispute mitigation measures. The Cabinet resolution would be planned and implemented at each locality, with oversight by that district's national land policy committee. Representatives from forest communities will be members on the committee, said Athapol.

Local people are invited to take part in the land rights verification process and the drafting of land use conditions for their local area alongside the related agencies, Athapol pledged. That participation should ensure the forestland management policy suits the situation in each area, he added.

"The intention of this Cabinet Resolution is to ensure land rights for the original inhabitants in the forest, and to encourage the communities in the forest live in harmony with nature and protect the forest," he said.

"Therefore, the people who are allowed to live in the forest, are required to comply with mutually agreed conditions with the related agencies to make sure that their livelihoods and land use activities will be consistent with nature and forest conservation."