

# Families Call for Boycott of Senator's 'Blood Sugar'

BY ZSOMBOR PETER  
AND HUL REAKSMEY  
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After years of futile protests demanding their land back, villagers forcibly evicted by sugarcane plantations connected to CPP Senator Ly Yong Phat launched a boycott campaign yesterday targeting the international firms that sell his sugar.

Thousands of families accuse the senator's plantations of forcing them off their farms and out of their forests in recent years for paddy, if any, compensation, pushing them deeper into poverty and poi-

soning their water. With the help of a few local NGOs, they have named themselves the Clean Sugar Campaign and hope their drive to "Boycott Blood Sugar" will win them their land back, or get them the compensation they believe they deserve.

At least seven sugarcane plantations in Koh Kong, Kompong Speu and Oddar Meanchey provinces have been linked to the senator either through government documents or the word of local officials.

"If you are buying this sugar, you are buying our blood," said

Phal Vannak, who watched employees of one of Mr. Yong Phat's sugar companies in Koh Kong destroy his crops two years ago.

He was one of three villagers representing the families who traveled to Phnom Penh to launch the boycott campaign and their new website—[www.boycottbloodsugar.net](http://www.boycottbloodsugar.net). The campaign is urging consumers to boycott Tate & Lyle sugar, a formerly British brand that was purchased in 2010 by American Sugar Refinery. American Sugar also produces the popular U.S. brand

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## NATIONAL

## Sugar...

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Domino.

"Please stop buying this sugar. Please stop buying our blood," Mr. Vannak said. "We will stop the boycott only when the company provides fair compensation and fair restitution."

The dispute drew international attention in late 2010 over the 10,000 tons of sugar Mr. Yong Phat's sugar plantations exported to England that year, duty-free, thanks to the European Union's Everything But Arms (EBA) trade scheme for least developed countries.

In April 2008, staff of the Angkor Sugar Company in Oddar Meanchey province wearing T-shirts bearing Ly Yong Phat's name demolished 154 homes in Bos village, according to a report by rights group Licadho. The sugar firm was one of three allegedly tied to both Thai sugar company Mitr Pohl and Mr. Yong Phat to win land concessions from the government the year before. Families say they had been moving into the area since 1998 and won official recognition for their village from local officials in 2003.

A year after the first houses were torn down, police burned

down the homes of another 100 families. A Royal Cambodian Armed Forces battalion partly funded by "charitable contributions" from Mr. Yong Phat barred rights workers from witnessing the eviction.

"One of the villages was completely razed to the ground," Smin Te recalled yesterday. "Now, people no longer have their houses, no shelter, they have no land and all the possessions that they had...and they can no longer do anything on their farmland anymore."

The representatives also blamed chemical runoff from the plantations for contaminating local streams and poisoning their families and their livestock.

For their loss, the companies promised villagers jobs on the new plantations.

"It is pretty good on the paper, it is so beautiful," said Mr. Vannak. "But in reality, it is just the opposite."

For those who can find work among the new sugarcane fields, he said, the work is irregular and grueling when it comes around.

Teng Kao, who lost his land to Mr. Yong Phat's Koh Kong Sugar company in 2006, said he can earn up to \$2.50 after a 12-hour day on the new plantation, hardly the better life his company promised.

"We have no money, our children cannot go to school and when we are sick, we can no longer afford health care," he said.

All the while, more Cambodian sugar has been making its way to England duty-free. According to E.U. records, Cambodian sugar exports to the country more than doubled in 2011 to 22,000 tons, earning \$14,189,000.

In 2010, an assistant to Mr. Yong Phat confirmed that the senator's plantations exported sugar to Tate & Lyle that year through its Thai partner, Khon Kaen Sugar, and credited EBA for making his sugar operations financially feasible.

Neither the E.U. nor the Cambodian government will say whether the same companies are still involved in the trade. Their public records offer only dollar figures and the weight of goods traded.

Jean-Francois Cautain, the E.U.'s ambassador to Cambodia, declined to comment on the boycott campaign, but said his delegation was "closely following" the country's many land disputes.

"The E.U. cannot but urge the government of Cambodia—as it has been doing in its regular dialogue with the latter—to take appropriate action to ensure that the legislation in place related to eco-

nomical land concessions, including those concessional areas granted for sugarcane plantations, are rigorously applied," he said.

As for Mr. Yong Phat, the senator offered to sit down with reporters to discuss his sugar business in May, but failed to make the appointed meeting. Efforts to contact him and his representatives since then have all failed. Representatives of Khon Kaen Sugar and Mitr Pohl in Thailand could not be reached.

On their new Blood Sugar website, villagers claim that Tate & Lyle in 2010 offered to audit its Cambodian sugar suppliers, but dropped the idea later that year after announcing the sale of its sugar operations to American Sugar.

American Sugar could not immediately be reached for comment. The NGOs say they've been ignored.

"So now it's time to take some action," said Eang Vuthy, a representative for Equitable Cambodia, one of the NGOs working with the families.

"If we do this boycott through this website, it will let the whole world know about our issue," added Mr. Vannak. "We hope that people living in other countries will know about our problem."