

## LOTUS REVOLUTION? March – June 2012

Written by Ruth Gleeson



*14-year-old girl killed by police during a raid on a Kratie community which was under a long-standing land dispute*

LICADHO Canada has had several busy months. March saw Cambodia chairing ASEAN, which led to a city-wide city lockdown on freedom of expression as military police lined the streets. LC worked closely with Boeung Kak Lake (BKL) and Borei Keila (BK) communities, who have now joined in solidarity with other informal groups during ASEAN's so called People's Forum. The informal groups fought to be heard throughout the People's Forum.

This year has been the most violent year in terms of crackdowns against Cambodia human rights defenders. Amidst this wave of violence, harassment, and [killings](#), LC wishes to highlight the courageous efforts of all Cambodian human rights defenders who continue to stand up despite threats, violence and arrests, especially the BKL community and Venerable Loun Sovath. The gains to civil society expression would not have been possible without them and they continue to face overwhelming obstacles in their advocacy work in Cambodia. LICADHO Canada salutes you!



*BKL women continue to take clothes off or show their underwear as protest strategies*

### Boeung Kak Lake League of Women (BKLW)

Throughout March and April the LC team were running to keep up with the BKLW of their community who continue to call for a solution to their land dispute with ruling party senator Lao Meng Khin. They marched and held demonstrations demanding the municipality to 1) stop evictions, 2) demarcate the 12.44 hectares which the Prime Minister had promised them in August 2011, and 3) grant land titles for the remaining 94 families who have been arbitrarily excluded. They held several press conferences to speak out about the acts of violence and harassment against them. Their actions and demands continued to fall on deaf ears.

Each time BKL demonstrated they employed new strategies: marching to the municipal office, the US embassy, and the Japanese embassy to submit petitions; trying on several occasions to access the EU residence and the Prime Minister's house where their efforts were obstructed by mixed police forces and barricades. One day at the beginning of May, the women [were attacked](#) by more than 100 anti-riot police while trying to lodge a petition for help to the World Bank. At least five women were injured. But they continued to struggle for their rights.

### Venerable Sovath update

Days before Venerable Loun Sovath returned to Cambodia from Canada in April 2012 he was announced as one of three finalists for the prestigious [Martin Ennals Award](#) for human rights defenders.

On April 26 Venerable returned to Cambodia to discover that [Chhut Wutty](#), director of the National Resources Protection Group and an outspoken advocate for Cambodia's forests, had been shot dead in an incident involving military police near



*Cambodian HRDs are no strangers to police violence*

an economic land concession area in Koh Kong Province. The handling of his murder investigation by authorities was [incredulous](#).

Venerable Sovath immediately joined both the BKL advocacy campaign and the informal groups. Travelling from Koh Kong to Phnom Penh to Banteay Srey, he supported and highlighted the victims of the growing number violent crackdowns against freedom of expression and right to assembly.

### May Madness

On May 22, 18 families from Village 1, together with BKLW, decided to hold one more solidarity action before the Commune Elections on June 3<sup>rd</sup>. They held a peaceful press conference, complete with singing and speeches, on the sand used to fill the lake. After a couple of hours, a mixed force of police surrounded the group of women and proceeded to violently stop the singing. As the residents dispersed, they were chased down by the authorities and carried on to awaiting police trucks. [Thirteen women were arrested](#), including a 72-year-old.

### Continued harassment of Venerable Loun Sovath

On May 24, after being detained for two nights in the Phnom Penh Municipal Police Station, the 13 women were woken before 5 am to be taken to the Phnom Penh Municipal Court where at least 100 media, monitors and villagers had gathered in expectation of a covert trial in the early hours. Protestors were quickly surrounded by over 200 mixed police forces. Roads around the court were barricaded.

Around 10am Venerable Sovath, who had also monitored and filmed the arrests on the 22nd, was violently intercepted by religious officials and men in plain clothes, [manhandled into a car](#), and taken to Botum Pagoda where he was held for 10 hours.

During the interrogation, religious officials presented Ven. Sovath with documents showing that Cambodia's Minister of Justice had approved a request by the Phnom Penh Municipal Court to charge Sovath with incitement under article 495 of the Penal Code. Ven. Sovath was given a choice: endorse a document promising to refrain from any and all activities related to human rights defense, or face defrocking, arrest, and criminal prosecution. He signed under duress, but the following day Venerable told media that *"I cannot open my eyes or ears without hearing the call for justice from the people. If there are calls, I will continue to join [...]"*.

### A trial of travesty

Meanwhile, back at the court house, the 13 BKL women were charged under articles of the 2001 Land Law the Penal Code in a speedy trial that was riddled with erroneous procedural violations.

The 13 women's lawyers requested a delay to allow for them to prepare their defence, which was denied. The lawyers then requested the case file and evidence. Again, the request was denied. The defence lawyers then made a request to bring witnesses, but this request was also denied. During the trial, police arrested two BKL residents who were waiting outside to be called as witnesses for the 13. The lawyers walked out of the court in protest, but the trial continued.

By 5:30 pm, all 13 women had been [sentenced to 2.5 years](#) in prison.



*A 72-year old BKL resident known as Yea Mommy arrested while singing.*

**WATCH VIDEO OF THE [ARRESTS](#)**



*Venerable Sovath is violently detained*

**WATCH VIDEO OF THE [VIOLENT DETENTION](#)**



*BKL calling out to the 13 women they see in the window of the court house.*



[freethe15.wordpress.com](http://freethe15.wordpress.com)

### Free the 15! Stop the Violence!

Since the convictions of the 13 women and pre-trial detention of the two people arrested during the trial, the BKL community, friends and supporters have launched the “[Free the 15! Stop the Violence!](#)” campaign. The campaign has a growing number of ‘pressure points’. At the ground level, the community has held 11 Community Actions at the time of this newsletter. The campaign has reached far – land rights groups in East Timor produced a [solidarity video](#) for and to the BKL community.

At the international level, more than 160 international organisations signed a [joint letter](#) to the World Bank. Human rights organisations brought the case to [Hillary Clinton](#) and Amnesty International started an [Urgent Action](#). The pressure continues to mount.

On June 18, the media announced the appeal trial for the 13 BKL would be on June 27. BKL community, friends and supporters will be there with bells on and continue to apply pressure on all stakeholders in the meantime.

### Borey in Rio

LICADHO Canada’s Project Manager Borey Penn joined Oxfam’s group of Action Partners in Brazil for the People’s Summit. He has been advocating for the BKL community and the Free the 15! Stop the Violence! campaign.

Three days prior to leaving and at the request of the BKL community, Borey filmed and produced a new video with LICADHO called “[From Homes to Prison Cells](#)”.

### Meet the 15!

Read about these amazing women in their short [biographies](#). Follow the campaign on [twitter](#).

**“We want to show the world what is happening.”**

Tep Vanny’s husband, Ou Kong Chea



The BKL 15 have a total of 43 children



BKL children sing for their parents’ freedom



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