

Old Style Landgrabbing & Lessons for Today's Activists

FTF in Ex-Dutch Estates

(West Java, Indonesia)

From 1965 to 1968 – a period infamously remembered in Indonesia for the brutal anti-communist purge undertaken by the military – some 1,110 hectares of land in West Java were seized by the armed forces and civilian officials of the Suharto government.

The land consisted of two former Dutch-run tea plantations called the Ganjartemu and Pasirpadang estates, which former plantation workers had “seized” from the Japanese in 1945, with the help of Indonesian freedom fighters. The farmers formed themselves into a group called “First Tiller Farmers” (FTF).

FTF asked help from the *Forum Kerakyatan Indonesia* (FORKI), which participated in the fight to overthrow the military regime in 1978. An advocacy team was put together to conduct thorough research at the location. Then followed three years of struggle that resulted in the return of 400 (out of 600) hectares of tilled FTF lands.

The FTF Struggle

FORKI responded to FTF’s appeal for help by first holding an internal forum discussion which included students from various universities. A visit was made to the areas; various data and findings were noted down, then discussed among the members of the Advocacy Team.

Each village formed an organization with a Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, and a General Assistant. A Coordinator was appointed by the five village leaders in a democratic manner.

After seven years of hard struggle, 60% of FTF lands have been reclaimed, although attacks and various dirty tactics have been used by the landgrabbers to retake the lands. It is significant to note, however, that they avoided direct violations of the law in order not to be hated, and to win the sympathy of the authorities and the community.

Impact of the Struggle

- Around 2,400 poor people who had no land at all and the ex-hard laborers of both plantations now have land to cultivate for their own needs.
- The movement had awakened an awareness of the people’s potentials and rights and raised their confidence and courage.
- The success of the struggle inspired similar cases nationwide, as well as attracted both local and national media attention – benefiting not only the FTF but also the poor farmers in the country.
- The FTF became a sustainable and self-governing organization, as a response to the conditions of the struggle to reclaim their land.

- By Noviar Safari, General-Secretary, Bina Desa

Conflict in Kraing Ta Seim

(Pursat, Cambodia)

In 1999, 47 families in the village of Kraing Ta Seim, just south of the town of Pursat, in Western Central Cambodia, were issued a land certificate in nearby Prey Roleap commune.

In 2002-2003, after the villagers had begun clearing the land, a group of soldiers from the Cambodian army confronted the villagers and informed them that the land belonged to them and that the people would have to move off it. Despite producing no official documents to substantiate their claims, the soldiers insisted that they were perfectly within their rights to assume the land for themselves, and told the community that their captain had authorized the acquisition.

Finding a Solution to the Conflict

In 2004, local NGO Alliance Association for Rural Restoration (AARR) began investigating the case to find a resolution to the land conflict that would be satisfactory to the needs of the Kraing Ta Seim community.

After building up a good understanding of the case AARR began establishing an advocacy community of 47 families involved in the conflict.

AARR then set about organizing discussions and negotiations between various key stakeholders in the dispute.

The next step for AARR after the initial discussions was to investigate the precise legal situation of the case. It was discovered that while both the commune chief and the military captain were both able to issue land certificates to individuals and communities they represented, in the case of Kraing Ta Seim, it was the community’s certificate that was legally the strongest.

Upon establishing the legal situation of the conflict, AARR arranged for further discussions with all involved parties, with the aim of implementing a preliminary solution to the conflict, in the form of a land division between Kraing Ta Seim and the military.

However, even this solution was met with some discontent, as 7 of the 47 families that made up Kraing Ta Seim disagreed with some aspects of the land division. Subsequently, these families decided to part from Kraing Ta Seim and cultivate by themselves.

Steps for the Future

What is now necessary is for both parties to sign a written agreement, confirming the position of each group with regard to the division of the land and hopefully prevent future disagreement or conflict over its ownership. In order to achieve this, AARR is planning a roundtable meeting of all involved parties, so as to set out a legally binding agreement regarding the land division.

- By Chet Charya, Executive Director, Star Kampuchea