

Guest Author: Escaping the Bulldozers – Land-grabbing in Phnom Penh⁺⁺

Anya Palm⁺ (Denmark)

Danish actor Karl Bille is going to Cambodia to make a documentary film. Three years ago the actor witnessed a violent eviction in Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh and the experience has affected him deeply. Today he is back to make a documentary about the country's struggles with "land grabbing."

Human Rights Cambodia Land Grabbing Community Artists

First time, Danish actor and musician Karl Bille came to Cambodia he heard people whispering. "They are going to tear down our houses!" was what he heard. Back then, in 2005, he did not understand why or who "they" were. But he quickly learned that one of the main problems in Cambodia today is "land grabbing" – when authorities force citizens away from an area of land without compensating them. He became involved with a couple of Danish activists who showed him an area called Dey Krohom, a poor neighborhood but located precisely in the middle of the capital Phnom Penh. The habitants here, well aware of their lucrative location and lack of means to keep it, were the people whispering about losing their homes.

"Dey Krohom is where the Cambodian musicians live – many of the most famous Cambodian artists live here, and they make instruments here. I was very welcomed by them, when I first came, and I made a lot of really good friends in Dey Krohom," says Karl Bille, who quickly made a habit of visiting the neighborhood every day, while he was visiting the country. It was with an uncanny feeling, he left for Denmark – he knew that the future for his friends in the district was very uncertain.

Three years later – in January 2008 – he came back to a changed neighborhood: "There were daily standoffs with authorities. There were threats and intimidation, and we frequently got insane phone calls from scared people, who wanted us to come down to Dey Krohom," he says, with a voice suddenly a tone deeper. He explains that the presence of a Westerner might help reduce how violent a stand-off would be. It did not help in this case, however. One morning, he woke up to witness Dey Krohom being demolished.

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“I lived nearby and could see smoke coming from the rooftops in the early morning. I ran down there and the area had been surrounded by police and bodyguards from the company 7G, who had bought the land from the Cambodian government,” he says. He managed to get in behind the barricades.

“People were screaming and crying, and the bulldozers were driving over people’s houses. The men with black helmets giving orders were very aggressive, and I saw my friends trying to save their things, but they were beaten and pushed away,” he recalls.

During his time in Cambodia, he has gotten particularly close with one family, and in the chaos he saw one of them, in front of a bulldozer.

“I called her my ‘mother,’ because she was taking so good care of me and everyone else. I saw her fall down, and then I saw her being run over by a bulldozer. I thought she was dead,” he says. Later, he realized, she had fallen down to the other side of the bulldozer, and was in fact unharmed, but because of the chaotic situation, none of it really registered with the actor.

“I was completely in shock, and deeply devastated. I didn’t know what to do,” he says.

He then did something unexpected, even by himself. He started filming himself while singing.

“I felt deeply torn about walking around singing, while the world is coming to an end around me. But I felt I did something,” he explains. He later released the song “Off the Agenda” from the album *Love & Eviction*, which he wrote during the tumultuous times in Cambodia. In the music video he uses the material, he recorded that day.

Bille was not the only one with a camera at Dey Krohom that day. Documentarist Kir Viedt, one of the Danish activists that initially showed Bille the neighborhood, documented the eviction as well.

“It was a matter of finding out what we could do, both in the situation and after,” she explains. In the aftermath, hundreds of families sought refuge with friends, neighbors and NGOs, and both Kir Viedt and Karl Bille got deeply involved in the immediate problems the eviction constituted for the now homeless villagers.

“We interviewed them, and followed them in their legal struggle to get back their land. We have so much of this on tape,” she says.

All this material now sitting in Kir Viedt’s camera, and Bille’s mobile phone is the main reason the pair is now back in South East Asia: To make a documentary that focuses on land grabbing in Cambodia.

“Today, I am feeling very ambivalent about this and it is quite nerve wrecking,” Bille says. He is sitting in Bangkok, en route to Cambodia, in his shorts and t-shirt, and he is nervous. The words come out of his mouth disorderly, as he constantly remembers more and more bits and pieces from what happened to him in Cambodia. He is mainly looking forward to reuniting with his friends from Dey Krohom, and to hear how their situation is now.

“I am deeply emotionally affected by this. And what I am most scared of is whether we can make a documentary that does these people justice. That we can get the message about how serious a problem land grabbing is through. This has become very personal for me, so I am going to Cambodia now to have closure by documenting what I saw, and the consequences of it today,” he says.

Kir Viedt agrees with him. “We are going down there to finish what we came for in 2008: To tell the world about what’s really going on in Cambodia,” she says.

The yet unnamed documentary is due to come out in 2013.

Captions for facing page from top left to lower right.

1: Kir Viedt is filming while Karl Bille negotiates a good price.

2: Karl Bille and Kir Viedt getting round Phnom Penh by tuk tuk .

3: From the left: Turis (former resident of Dey Krohom), Vichet (the star of the documentary), Panha (Vichet’s youngest son), Dtieun (wife of Vichet), Bro Van (Vichet’s oldest son), Karl Bille, Borey (NGO-worker), Kir Viedt, Jayk (Vichet’s middle son).

4: Vichet and Bro Van his oldest son.

5: Karl Bille is making funny faces while entertaining some of the children of Dey Krohom.

