

NATIONAL

K Thom Protest Against Forest Clearing Halted

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Local authorities in Kompong Thom province's Sandan district yesterday stopped about 80 villagers from traveling to protest at the offices of two companies they claim are clearing forest on the border of Kratie, Kompong Thom, Preah Vihear and Stung Treng provinces for rubber plantations.

Chheang Vuthy, a 31-year-old villager representative from Sandan district's Meanrith commune, said up to 400 villagers from the four affected provinces had planned to congregate outside the offices of PLT Company and CRCK Company, whose side-by-side offices straddle the remote Preah Vihear-Kompong Thom provincial border.

Mr Vuthy said villagers' livelihoods had been seriously affected

by the land clearing, which started roughly four months ago.

"[Villagers] just want to know about the companies' licenses, but local authorities said...we should send a letter to the provincial government's office," Mr Vuthy said.

"The villagers would not act violently. The companies should stop clearing forest, even though they have licenses from the government, because it affects people's livelihoods."

Kompong Thom provincial governor Chhun Chhorn said he had ordered the Sandan district governor to stop the protesters from traveling to the companies' offices, because he feared they would turn violent and damage property.

Mr Chhorn said an impact assessment had already been carried out by CRCK, to which the govern-

ment had granted a 7,000-hectare land concession for a rubber plantation in the past two years.

Chet Ton, a community organizing officer for the Kompong Thom-based Environment and Health Education NGO, said yesterday that the section of forest being cleared was one of the last remaining dense forests in Cambodia.

"This bulldozing of the forest is done without any environmental impact assessments...and the companies try to hide [information]," Mr Ton said.

Prime Minister Hun Sen earlier this month raised the prospect of increasing the total size of rubber plantations, but warned that development should not come at the expense of the country's forest, which can be used to attract international climate change funds.