

Life on the edge of eviction

Shane Worrell and Mom Kunthea

A GROUP of families in the capital's Por Sen Chey district gathered in their sludge-filled street yesterday, fearing authorities were moving in to evict them – for a second time.

Many of the Andong village residents had taken the day off work; if anyone was coming to knock down their houses, they were going to be there.

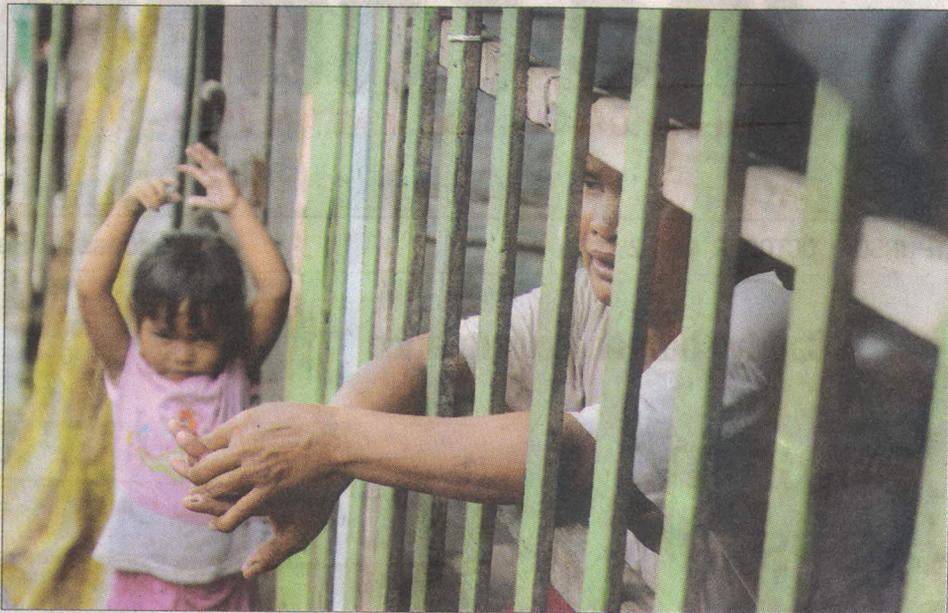
"We're not going anywhere," Horm Hoy, 33, said. "We're worried the authorities will come and destroy our homes because the deadline was today."

Nineteen families along Hoy's street received letters from district authorities two weeks ago, which they say order them to tear down their houses and vacate their land – without compensation – to make way for a road and water piping.

According to the villagers, they had until yesterday to comply or face the force of the authorities. Fellow villager Nuon Tom, 43, says the letter has caused her a lot of stress.

Like the other 18 families, Tom and her family were evicted from Sambok Chab community, in the capital's Dangkor district, in 2006. She can't go through it again, she said. Besides, she has nowhere else to go.

"I cannot sleep and go to work because I am afraid the authorities will come and destroy my house," she said.



Villagers in Andong village say they are concerned about the impending eviction. PHA LINA

"I just do not believe in the authorities anymore."

Families who fear eviction live in brick and tin houses they built themselves after being sent to Andong village. They say the authorities reneged on a promise to move them somewhere better.

Tom, her husband and five children live on the bottom floor of a two-storey building. They share one room they can barely stand up straight in. When it rains, the floor turns to mud.

"We have tried very hard to live a happy life here, even without enough food or money, and now they want to evict us from this place," she said.

Parts of Andong village resembled a swamp yesterday. The unpaved roads had turned to mud, thwarting large vehicles' attempts to enter, and pedestrians stumbled through puddles riddled with garbage and human waste.

Andong Village III chief Sok Chham said the authorities had asked the villagers to vacate their houses only while work was carried out that would improve infrastructure.

"We are not evicting them forever," he said. "We just want them to move for a while, because we need to build a pipe to stop flooding.

"They shouldn't be scared, be-

cause we'll allow them to come back and live at the same place after we install a water pipe."

But villager Bo Sophan, 36, said commune authorities had called the families in for a meeting on Tuesday that had caused even more confusion.

"They told us it is up to us whether we want to move," he said. "But I don't know what they want."

That's why, he said, residents remained on guard, ready for police or other officials to arrive to knock down their houses.

"Where would we live? They did not show us or tell us where we should go – and our deadline has arrived," he said.