

Slum Granted Lease by SRT

written by กองบรรณาธิการ | March 25, 2011

KHON KAEN - Community leaders, local politicians, and villagers met today to mark the start of a land rental agreement between the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) and the inhabitants of the Nong Waeng slum community. The agreement comes just five months after parliament approved plans to move ahead with the Chinese-Thai joint high-speed rail venture.

With 180 billion baht tentatively allocated for the Nong Khai-Bangkok line, the stakes have been raised for rail-side communities to lease their land or move before construction begins. The people of Nong Waeng have been awarded their lease just in time and now, for the first time in the settlement's lifetime, its residents of laborers, scavengers, and vendors will have legal access to basic utilities.

Over a generation ago, the earliest inhabitants of Nong Waeng were lured to Khon Kaen by Bangkok-based development initiatives, but were left without affordable housing options and settled along the railway. For the last 50 years, the community has squatted on the SRT-owned land, fearing eviction and rerouting water and electricity from neighbors at inflated prices. On April 1, residents will begin legally leasing land from the SRT and paying for their utilities at market rates.



On behalf of Nong Waeng, Prayad Karnplook (left) accepts the agreement from MP Prajak Klaewklarharn.

While today's ceremony could easily have been described as a celebration, complete with traditionally-costumed schoolchildren and the familiar thump of Thai pop-music, community leader Prayad Karnplook was quick to dispel any misconceptions. "This is only the beginning," he said. "It will be a celebration when everyone has finally settled down in the new location and the utilities are up and running."

Mr. Prayad's pragmatism is, perhaps, well founded. The imminent infrastructural improvements require relocating the entire community across the tracks and a few kilometers away. The move will be cumbersome and, some claim, underfunded. An as-of-yet unscheduled appraisal of each home's value by government inspectors will net each family anywhere from 20 to 40 thousand baht per house, a sum of money one villager described as "definitely not enough." Furthermore, there is some restrained skepticism surrounding the duration of the lease the SRT

has granted them, a skepticism that MP Prajak Klaewklarharn sought to dismiss in his address to community members this morning.

“Even though the lease is three years, it can be renewed,” the Bhum Jai Thai party member and former transportation secretary said. “Three years and then another three years - I expect that in 20 years the community will be in the same place.”

Mr. Prajak’s reassurance, however, is complicated by the recent lease agreement signed by the leaders of nearby Pornsawan, another community alongside the train tracks. The villagers there were granted a 30 year lease for their land. A representative from the Four Regions Slum Network, an NGO that helped both communities get their leases, was not surprised. Ghakagapong Buripla explained that Pornsawan is located on land that the SRT is certain they’ll never want to further develop. Nong Waeng, on the other hand, will have to wait and see.

And yet, despite the lingering doubts and concerns, Mr. Ghakagapong has reasons to be hopeful. Of the 13 Khon Kaen slum communities allied with his organization, 12 have have been granted leases by the SRT and so far, things have gone smoothly. “I’m quite pleased with the people who have gathered together to get this land,” he said about today’s accomplishment. They’ve assured the “basic rights of citizens.”