

# [Chaiyaphum forest community hopes for ministry to consider longstanding land conflict](#)

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CHAIYAPHUM - A forest community's land dispute is inching toward a resolution after 40 years of suffering, grief and protest. Hopes to finally win their struggle are running high among the residents of Khok Yao village in Chaiyaphum's Khon San district after a neighboring group was granted the right to land last month.

"We will know whether or not we will suffer more or be happy," says Bunmi Witayarot, a 51-year-old Khok Yao villager, referring to a new review of land disputes by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

On February 7, a ministry sub-committee met with the People's Movement for a Just Society (P-MOVE) to begin discussing 66 cases of forest land disputes across the country. The sub-committee was established in response to P-MOVE's [three-day protest in Bangkok last month](#), which called upon Minister Varawut Silpa-archa to resolve the disputes that his predecessor had promised to address.

The meeting focused on the demands presented at the January protest. P-MOVE called for the government to grant land management rights to communities on forest land, provide access to electricity and water, prevent local authorities from making arrests, and drop any legal charges against villagers for forest encroachment.

However, the plight of Khok Yao village is considered to be one of the less urgent disputes by P-MOVE and will not be reviewed until the ministry makes a decision on about 40 other cases, according to Pramote Phonpinyo, head of the Isaan Land Reform Network, a local NGO working on land rights issues in the region.

On February 14, at a meeting at Government House, Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam urged the ministry to address the issues brought forward by P-MOVE within 90 days, according to a post on the [organization's Facebook page](#). But it remains unclear whether this timeline is realistic given the high number of cases.

So, Khok Yao continues to wait.

More than four decades ago, the community's ancestral land was declared a national forest reserve, turning residents into illegal occupants. Since then the villagers have been living without running water or electricity and were frequently threatened with lawsuits and eviction.

"I don't even have water for washing," says Suphap Khamlae, a Khok Yao villager who served six months in prison for [land encroachment in 2017](#).

In 1978, the Forest Industry Organization (FIO) designated 4,401 rai (about 704 hectares) of land in Kon San district as the Kon San Forest Project. The reforestation project introduced eucalyptus plantations into the area to support the region's paper industry. This business move initiated the eviction of over one thousand villagers.

To this day, Khok Yao villagers are still protesting to live on the grounds their families occupied for decades. At the beginning of this fight, 33 households were a part of Khok Yao village. Today, the community has dwindled down to 16 families.

"I have been fighting since I was 40 or 50 and now I'm in my mid-70s," says Phan Kulhong, a 72-year-old villager.



Phan Kunhong walks with her granddaughter. She is one of the oldest members of Khok Yao village.

In the past, Kunhong would frequently make the trip to Bangkok to protest for the community's land rights. Now, she says she is too tired to leave the village.

Khok Yao's land classification has made their fight particularly challenging. The government designates the land as a [Level 1A watershed area](#), raising it to the level of a "national natural resource." The ministry claims these areas have never faced disturbance of any kind. The classification has provided the authorities with legal grounds to charge villagers with trespassing and encroachment.

"This classification has allowed the government to make claims over who can and cannot occupy the land," says Pramote of the Isaan Land Reform Network. "Indigenous communities have been heavily disadvantaged by this."

The designation is intended to be a part of an ecological preservation project, but the title "watershed" seems ironic, considering the persistent drought. "They are still trying to claim that this is a Level 1A watershed area. Yet, we cannot find any water at all," says Khok Yao villager Bunmi.



Pramote Phonpinyo is an advocate for Khok Yao and Baw Kaew, another protest village affected by

forest land policies. He heads up the Isaan Land Reform Network and previously resided in the Baw Kaew community.

According to the Thai Meteorological Department, the country is currently facing its [worst drought in decades](#). In December, Monton Sudprasert, director-general of the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation [ordered local officials to provide water trucks](#) to drought-affected areas in Chaiyaphum's neighboring province, Phetchabun.

The Khok Yao villagers have not received any such assistance from the government.



Bunmi Witayarot explains that the drought and the dry land has made farming impossible for the Khok Yao community. The able-bodied villagers work laborer jobs in order to sustain the community.

Throughout the years, much of the Khok Yao community has left, passed away, been jailed for trespassing, or disappeared. Den Khamlae, Suphap's husband and a prominent civil rights activist in Isaan, is believed to be a victim of forced disappearance [after he vanished in April 2016](#).

"There are only a few people here still trying to fight to live here," says Sombat Thuaikaeo, a Khok Yao villager who works as a rubber-tapper to support the

community. “Everyone here has hope, but they have had broken hearts from [how long it has taken].”

Bunmi reminds himself of the meaning of the earth they stand on. “The reason we keep fighting is because this is the lost plot of land that our parents gave to us,” he says.

But even with this determination, Khok Yao village is up against more than they can handle on their own. The community asks for the help of activists, NGOs, and the general public in pressuring the Thai government to address their case.

As for the likelihood of the ministry deciding in Khok Yao’s favor, “It depends on the movement of the people,” says Isaan Land Reform Network’s Pramote.



Suphap Khamlae, who lost her husband Den in 2016 and was imprisoned for land encroachment a year later, is determined to continue the fight for the right to land.

But there is hope for the future after the [recent success of Baw Kaew](#) village, a neighboring forest community. At the end of last year, the [community won back 366 rai](#) (about 58 hectares) of disputed land in the Kon San Forest Reserve, almost half of the land they had been asking for. The villagers can now legally occupy the area under a community land title.

People in Baw Kaew say that media coverage, especially that of Thai PBS, helped pressure the Thai government into making their decision. As the Khok Yao community waits to hear from the ministry, they hope to gain similar support.

“We would like you to communicate to the public and the government how difficult our situation is,” Suphap says. “We can barely live here anymore.”

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