

Factsheet: Yorm Bopha, Cambodian land rights activist (June 2013)

Who is Yorm Bopha?

Yorm Bopha is a 29-year-old mother of one who has been actively involved in her community's struggle against forced eviction related to a high profile land conflict at Boeng Kak that has raged since 2007. When thirteen of her fellow land rights activists (the "Boeng Kak 13") were arrested, charged, convicted and imprisoned on 24 May 2012 as a result of a peaceful land rights demonstration, [Bopha emerged at the forefront of a campaign for the women's release](#).

What is she charged with and who supports her?

Bopha is currently serving a two-year prison sentence after being found guilty on a bogus charge of assault. The charge was upheld on appeal on 14 June 2013 when the original sentence of three years was reduced to two. Yorm Bopha has 15 months left to serve in prison. "Considering the blatant lack of evidence to convict Bopha, it is widely believed that she was targeted as a result of her activism and outspokenness, especially during the campaign for the release of the Boenk Kak 13," says [the Cambodian Center for Human Rights \(CCHR\)](#), which has campaigned for her release. CCHR organised a campaign to send Bopha messages of hope in prison through its "Voices for Freedom" radio campaign. The Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) has provided legal representation to Bopha. Amnesty International calls her a prisoner of conscience, due to her continued incarceration.



What is really behind the charges?

On 27 December 2012, Bopha was found guilty of "intentional violence with aggravating circumstances" under Article 218 of the Cambodian Criminal Code 2009 (the "Penal Code") and was sentenced to three years in prison.

Yorm Bopha supporters submit petition to the King calling for Bopha's release, 29 March 2013. (Photo: CCHR)

But human rights groups say her imprisonment is really an effort to silence her and to end the land rights movement around Boeng Kak. "As a result of her visibility at protests calling for the release of the Boeng Kak 13 and her outspokenness in the media, the authorities began to target Bopha and she was allegedly verbally threatened and intimidated," reports [CCHR in a briefing note](#). "She said that she was told repeatedly by police that she was 'on the blacklist' and that she *"would be in trouble soon."*

Why is her case so important?

Bopha's case is significant because dissenting voices in lands rights issues are not tolerated in Cambodia. In March 2013, broadcaster and human rights defender Mam Sonando was released from prison after his sentence was reduced from 20-years in jail for reporting on land rights issues. He had been jailed since July 2012. In April 2012, fixer and environmental activist Chut Wutty was murdered while investigating illegal logging. In October 2012, a deceased military police officer was named as his murderer.

The Boeng Kak activists have staged several protests against Bopha's imprisonment. Notably, on 13 March 2013, a group of peaceful protesters from the Boeng Kak community went to the Ministry of Justice to demand her release. When the Ministry failed to respond, the protesters moved to the Prime Minister's house. The protesters were surrounded by a group of approximately 200 police and military police, who were then joined by a group of about 100 security guards from a nearby park. The protest turned violent when security forces lost control and began [physically attacking the crowd](#). Six of the protesters were seriously injured. Amongst the six seriously injured was Lous Sakhorn, who was beaten by around ten security guards and had several of his teeth knocked out and his leg severely injured.

What is happening in the Boeng Kak community?

Boeng Kak Lake is located in Khan Daun Penh and Khan Toul Kork in the northern area of the capital city of Phnom Penh in Cambodia. The Lake was the largest urban wetland in Phnom Penh, before the Cambodian government granted the Shukaku Company (owned by leading party Senator Lao Meng Khin) a 99-year lease in 2007, resulting in the 90-hectare lake being filled with

sand to build condominiums and other complexes. The development required the forced eviction of Boeng Kak community members, and has had major social and environmental impacts on the community.

When are the key dates in Yorm Bopha's case?

4 September 2012: Bopha was arrested with her husband Lous Sakhorn by plain-clothed police officers and she was jailed at Prey Sar prison, while her husband was released.

27 December 2012: Bopha sentenced to three years in prison

January 2013: Bopha filed for appeal. A hearing date was not provided until June 2013.

27 March 2013: Second appeal for bail denied by the Supreme Court on the grounds that Bopha has been found guilty of the charges against her and that, although she said she had a heart condition that needed regular treatment, no evidence of illness had been produced.

10 May 2013: Bopha was transferred from Prey Sar to correctional center Police Judiciare (PJ).

5 June 2013: Yorm Bopha appeared at the Court of Appeal in Phnom Penh, however the hearing was not complete and was postponed until 14 June 2013.

14 June 2013: The assault charge was upheld on appeal and the original sentence of three years was reduced to two, leaving 15 months left for Yorm Bopha to serve in prison.

17-21 June 2013: During the IFEX General Meeting and Strategy Conference hosted by IFEX member the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR), IFEX members and partners will visit Yorm Bopha in prison and try to meet with the Prime Minister or relevant authorities to ask for her release and to allow greater freedom of expression and assembly in Cambodia. IFEX is also launching a digital campaign in support of Bopha on 18 June 2013.

28 July 2013: Parliamentary elections will be held in Cambodia.