





WASHINGTON DC - Cambodian rights issues are in the spotlight this week, with a delegation of activists arriving in Washington for a leadership awards ceremony.

Tep Vanny, a Cambodian housing rights advocate who has been central to organizing other activists in Phnom Penh, is in Washington to receive a leadership award from Vital Voices, an organization started by Hillary Clinton in 1997.

Accompanying her are two other activists, Eang Vuthy, director of Equitable Cambodia, and Sia Phirum, secretariat director of the Housing Rights Task Force. In interviews with VOA Khmer, the Cambodian activists said they will meet with prominent international groups and policymakers to explain land grabs, forced evictions and other pressing issues.

That includes meetings that focus on Cambodia's sugar trade to the European Union, which relies on land that farmers say were taken from them by a company belonging to powerful Cambodian officials. Eang Vuthy said more international pressure will prevent land grabs for major export crops like sugar.

"Both the EU and partner organizations have thoroughly worked to solve these problems, but in fact we don't have a solution," he said. "Everyone is working on it."

The EU and private sugar companies have their own policies for investment and trade that could lead to action, he said. "I think the solution will definitely occur as long as all the partners work together."

Sia Phirum, whose Housing Rights Task Force helps advocate for 61 families who say they have been refused land on a major development site at Beoung Kak lake, said many of those affected—and who are activists—are women.

Prime Minister Hun Sen last year ordered land be given to the families, who are all that remain of some 4,000 displaced, but advocates say they were not given land by local authorities. Sia Phirum said she was proud of Cambodian women for their non-violent advocacy. "One cannot say we've struggled in vain," she said.

The leadership award for Tep Vanny will encourage more women to participate in politics and advocacy, she said. "We are human beings," she said. "We should not give up our struggles." With more spotlight on Cambodia, Sia Phirum said she hoped the government will reconsider its approach to land issues. "Otherwise, Cambodia's reputation is in a downward spiral."