

Land rights in Thailand

STORY

Thai land rights campaigners' most powerful weapon?
Access to information

Abridged from article by Alisa Tang (Reuters)

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Klong Sai Pattana, Thailand

Along a mud road deep inside oil palm and rubber plantations in the southern Thai province of Surat Thani, handwritten signs tag grim evidence of a struggle for land that began two decades ago, and then turned violent and deadly.

One sign points to the area illegally used by a palm oil company.

In a grove of banana trees, a sign for “bunker” indicates a low, palm-leaf camouflaged mud hut built six years ago for women and children to sleep in while men patrolled forests ringing with gunfire.

Further on is a ruined, one-room shack with bamboo floors and rusted roofing, marked as the home of Somporn Pattaphum, born 1957, died 2010.

Somporn was the first of four people from Klong Sai Pattana who were killed by unidentified gunmen.

“He was sitting at this house next door when he was shot,” said Khuan Panmuang, a fellow land rights defender from a nearby village. “They keep his home in case his children want to join them here.”

“As soon as we had the right to access this information, we were able look at the information on land owned by the government and see, was it legally held or not? Who was holding it?”

These landmarks are just some of the evidence collected by villagers since Thailand’s 1997 constitution granted the right to access official information - for the first time allowing people to demand documentation for murky land deals across the country.

With this constitutional right, and the subsequent Official Information Act of 1997, land rights campaigners wielded a key weapon to investigate government property that had long been in the grip of investors, in the hope that it would be redistributed to farmers as part of Thai land reforms.

Land returned

They uncovered expired and illegal concessions on land owned by the government’s Agricultural Land Reform Office (ALRO), stockpiled reams of documents, and in the case of Klong Sai Pattana, helped to win a court case to reclaim the land from the trespassing palm oil company.

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www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-landrights-idUSKCN0ZU00U



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