

High and dry: developed Cambodian wetlands raise flood risk

July 27 2020, by Suy Se



The aquatic plants growing on the wetlands act as a waste treatment area

More than a million Cambodians are at risk from increased flooding and worsening food security, NGOs warned Monday, due to the destruction and gradual filling-in of Phnom Penh's wetlands by politically connected

developers.

Historically a city of lakes, the Cambodian capital has developed rapidly in recent decades, replacing its various bodies of water with [urban sprawl](#) and towering skyscrapers.

One of its last remaining [large lakes](#) is Boeung Tompun, in the city's south, which gives way to the 1,500-hectare (3,700-acre) swampy Choeung Ek wetlands.

But a report released Monday by four NGOs said a massive development project for a satellite city, known as ING City, has been "progressively destroying" the area by filling it in since 2004 to create land for real estate.

The [aquatic plants](#) growing on the wetlands act as a waste treatment area, allowing sewage water from Phnom Penh to drain through it before it exits into the Tonle Bassac, which is connected to the Mekong River.

"If the wetlands continue to be infilled, it is likely that nearly half of Phnom Penh, roughly 1.2 million people, will be at an increased risk of flooding," said the report funded by the European Union.

The area also acts as natural water storage during the country's monsoon seasons, absorbing about 70 percent of all rain and wastewater, "making it a critical part of Phnom Penh's flood mitigation system".

Satellite imagery shows that a third of the area has been pumped with sand, the report said, while various government sub-decrees indicate plans to fill about 90 percent of the area.



Historically a city of lakes, the Cambodian capital has developed rapidly since the 1980s

'Need the land'

Besides the flood threat to the surrounding area, more than a thousand families stand to be directly impacted as they either live there or make a living planting crops on the resource-rich swamp.

Farmers on Monday worked on small boats, tending to their crops of morning glory and water mimosas under the scorching afternoon sun.

Nearby, a truck dumped sand to fill up the lake's edges as a tractor bulldozed over it.



One of the city's last remaining large lakes is Boeung Tompun, in the city's south

The satellite city development is led by ING Holdings, which was founded by Ing Bunhov, a tycoon well connected to the kingdom's ruling party and strongman premier Hun Sen.

A major road, christened Hun Sen Boulevard, was opened in 2017 to cross the wetlands from north to south.

Government spokesman Phay Siphon defended the project, saying that "people need the land".

He added that the city is working on a wastewater treatment plant to offset the impact.



More than a thousand families stand to be directly impacted, as they either live there or make their living by planting crops on resource-rich swamp

To avoid flooding, "we are not letting them develop the whole area immediately all at once", Siphon told AFP.

Critics—including the late celebrated architect Vann Molyvann—have blasted the government for Phnom Penh's unchecked urbanisation, saying that the lack of careful planning has exacerbated land-rights issues and flooding throughout the [city](#).

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