

# Sand Extraction in Koh Kong Province Halted, Ministry Says

BY [KHUON NARIM](#) AND [BEN PAVIOUR](#) | NOVEMBER 17, 2016 | [អានជាភាសាខ្មែរ](#)

[ADD TO FAVORITE](#)

Facing mounting scrutiny over the country's sand trade, the Ministry of Mines and Energy said on Wednesday that all sand extraction had been suspended in Koh Kong province, where much of the country's extraction takes place.

"We have suspended it for a long time already," ministry spokesman Meng Saktheara said on Wednesday, referring further questions to his colleague Dith Tina, who did not respond to requests for comment.



Villagers and activists take part in a blessing ceremony at Lovers Island in Koh Kong province on Monday. Activists say the island and others like it are disappearing due to sand dredging. (San Mala/Mother Nature)

Alex Gonzalez-Davidson, exiled director of the environmental NGO Mother Nature, confirmed that the group's members had observed a lull in the activity, but said it only began in recent days.

"We noticed that approximately on the 10th or 11th, most activities had come to a stop, and we will receive more reports on whether they have restarted in the next few days," he said in an online message, adding

that it was possible operations were continuing in more remote locations.

If enforced, the move appears to [meet the demands](#) of a group of civil society organizations that asked the ministry to suspend Koh Kong dredging until it got to the bottom of unusual trade export figures.

Numbers from the [U.N. Commodity Trade Statistics Database](#) (Comtrade) show that the rest of the world—almost entirely Singapore—reported importing over 60 million metric tons more sand than Cambodia reported to have exported from 2005 to last year.

A Ministry of Commerce spokesman blamed "[ineffective practices](#)" for the gap. The Ministry of Mines and Energy acknowledged in a [memo earlier this month](#) that it

“still faces some challenges” in regulating the trade and said it welcomed NGOs to collaborate in getting to the bottom of the difference. It also said it was barring sand exports and issuing new dredging licenses during its investigation.

At a closed-door meeting with 13 representatives of the groups on Friday, Mr. Tina said that discrepancies in import and export figures were routine, using the example of trade between the U.S. and China, according to Mother Nature co-founder San Mala.

“Even with the U.S., there is also a difference,” Mr. Mala said on Friday. All the same, “why the gap is really different, [Mr. Tina] cannot explain because he just showed the terms and conditions of the U.N. [Comtrade] website.”

Most economists agree that such trade gaps are routine, but several have said that the scale of the difference in sand figures, as well as a roughly [\\$1 billion difference in wood exports](#) over the same period, were unusual and warranted further investigation.

The sand trade appears to be especially prone to under-reporting exports, with just 4 percent of Singapore’s global imports showing up in other countries’ export figures.

In an interview with Radio France Internationale earlier this month, Mr. Saktheara suggested that those irregularities might mask illicit trade involving countries that had banned sand exports, such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

The differing figures might be due to “smuggling from other countries that could include Cambodia to Singapore,” he said. Ships “could do some smuggling using the Cambodian flag if we see statistics showing many ships that used Cambodian flags, but were not from Cambodia.”

The Singaporean Embassy in Phnom Penh did not respond to a request for comment on Wednesday.

In response to similar allegations in 2010, Singapore’s Ministry of National Development said it did “not condone the illegal export or smuggling of sand, or any extraction of sand that is in breach of the source countries’ laws and rules on environmental protection,” according to the Straits Times newspaper.

[narim@cambodiadaily.com](mailto:narim@cambodiadaily.com), [paviour@cambodiadaily.com](mailto:paviour@cambodiadaily.com)

© 2016, *The Cambodia Daily*. All rights reserved. No part of this article may be reproduced in print, electronically, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without written permission.