

Cambodia presses for answers on Singapore sand trade discrepancy

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IN BRIEF

Cambodian ministers will appear before parliament tomorrow to answer questions from the country's anticorruption commission about a \$750 million discrepancy in data on sand exports to Singapore. Official data from the United Nations Comtrade database, Cambodia and Singapore details \$753 million of sand that is unaccounted for. Recently, the Cambodian government shifted the blame for that discrepancy to Singapore.

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Cambodian government records show that in the past seven years, 2.8 million tons of sand have been exported from Cambodia to Singapore, with a value of \$5.5 million. The Singapore government, however, is reporting imports of 74 million tons of Cambodian sand, leaving a discrepancy of 71 million tons, valued in Singapore at \$753 million.

Vann Sophath, land reform coordinator at the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, told MLex: "In light of the scale of the discrepancy in the figures, there is a need for transparency regarding how these figures were arrived at on the part of both the exporting and importing countries, to reassure the public that relevant laws – regarding taxation, customs, human rights impacts, and environmental and mining regulation – are being properly, consistently and effectively enforced."

Previously, Cambodian ministries have blamed "inefficient practices" and "some challenges" in regulating the sand trade, and different record-keeping techniques, for the discrepancy in the numbers.

Although unconfirmed, it is understood that Singapore considers the details of its sand sourcing for its massive land reclamation projects to be confidential and a matter of national security. Neither JTC Corp, the government agency in Singapore that oversees industrial infrastructure development, nor the country's Ministry of National Development, would provide any data on the companies

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from which they procure sand.

In the past few weeks, the Cambodian Ministry of Mines and Energy has said that the difference in records might be caused by smuggling from other countries in the region to Singapore. Malaysia banned shipments of sand to Singapore in 1997, Indonesia introduced a similar ban in 2007, and Vietnam did the same in 2009.

Smugglers could be flying the Cambodian flag to get around sand export bans in those three countries, the ministry said, suggesting that Singapore had been accepting tens of millions of tons of illegal sand.

It is understood that tomorrow, Cambodian Minister for Mines and Energy Suy Sem will be expected to answer questions from the National Assembly's anticorruption commission on how Cambodia – Southeast Asia's most corrupt country, according to Transparency International and other NGOs – reached its export figures and whether Singapore – Asia's least corrupt country – is to be held accountable for the discrepancy.

Sopath added that although he welcomed the legislature's role in scrutinizing the figures and holding the ministry to account, he hoped that the session would allow a constructive discussion of the complex issues surrounding illegal sand dredging in Cambodia and its impact on affected communities, and not simply turn into a narrow disagreement over the sources of data invoked.

Although Singapore's government has said it is not involved in the sand trade, saying that it involves merely "commercial transactions" in the private sector, this morning a spokesman for JTC Corp confirmed that it "does import sand on a commercial basis for land reclamation projects that we oversee."

The spokesman added: "It is quite a leap to allege that JTC, or any public or private organization, had sourced sand illegally from any source country by looking at export/import data."

Singapore's Ministry of National Development has declined to comment on the figures. Rejecting a 2010 report by environmental NGO Global Witness that claimed Singapore had imported Cambodian sand illegally and without regard for the environment, the ministry said it was "committed to the protection of the global environment" and that 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".

Since independence in 1965, Singapore's land area has grown by 22 percent, from 58,000 hectares to 71,000 hectares. The government expects to require another 5,600 hectares by 2030.

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