

Environmental Campaigner's Appeal Goes to the Supreme Court

BY [AUN PHEAP](#) | JUNE 22, 2017

An activist allied with environmental NGO Mother Nature on Wednesday pleaded with the Supreme Court to overturn an illegal logging conviction he received for cutting wood to build a community center.

Ven Vorn, an ethnic Chong resident of Koh Kong province, had worked alongside the NGO to protest a planned hydropower dam that would flood the area's Areng Valley, displacing hundreds of indigenous families and endangering animal species.



Ven Vorn in March last year (Den Seymar)

He received a one-year suspended sentence in March last year for cutting wood for the center from inside a protected area. An initial appeal was rejected in September.

Contacted after the 20-minute hearing at the Supreme Court on Wednesday, Mr. Vorn said he remained committed to clearing his name.

“Even though the punishment was suspended after serving four months and 25 days in prison, I cannot accept it because I am a minority that has been living in Areng for a long time,” he said.

Mr. Vorn maintained that he had legally purchased the wood to build the center for people to study English, and was within his rights as an indigenous Cambodian harvesting timber for community use.

“I bought the wood, not to use for my personal interest or for business. We bought the wood for the requirement of people living in the area,” he said.

“I think that my activity was not wrong because I am a minority and we have the right to use the wood for the Khmer tradition, and the money did not belong to me. We collected it from the people,” he said.

A separate conviction against Mr. Vorn for destroying evidence has since been overturned, Koh Kong Provincial Court Judge Ang Chanda said.

“I have canceled the charge for the destruction of the evidence because he was found to have not committed the crime,” he said. “We investigated and found [other] people burned the evidence.”

Alex Gonzalez-Davidson, the director of Mother Nature, who was deported in 2015, said he believed the legal pursuit of Mr. Vorn was due to fears he would join the opposition CNRP.

“Ven Vorn’s judicial repression was never about his nature-related activism, but rather about the paranoia by the pro-CPP cartel that rules Koh Kong with impunity that Ven Vorn was going to jump ships and join the CNRP as a candidate in the recent commune elections,” he said in an email.

“The aim was to not just neutralize him as a potential candidate, but also to send a strong message to the nascent pro-CNRP movement that the CPP must at all costs continue reigning over the area.”

The Supreme Court will announce a verdict on the appeal on June 28.

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