

Apr

Barack Obama and Raúl Castro hold the first formal meeting between US and Cuban leaders in over 50 years at the Summit of the Americas in Panama City. It's the first time Cuba has been included in the summit. Sat 11th

Ten Cambodian land rights activists including Tep Vanny are released from Prey Sar prison following a royal pardon. →

Hillary Clinton confirms she is running as a Democratic candidate for the US presidency in the 2016 election. Sun 12th

"If she writes or says anything it's amazing PR"

Armenia's minister for the diaspora Hranush Hakobyan comments on US celebrity Kim Kardashian's visit to the country's genocide memorial on the 100th anniversary of the killings.

Three former employees of US private military contractor Blackwater are each sentenced to 30 years in prison, and a fourth ex-employee receives a life sentence, after being found guilty of killing 14 civilians in the Nisour Square massacre in Baghdad in 2007. Dustin Heard, Evan Liberty, Nicholas Slatten and Paul Slough were part of a Blackwater tactical support team called 'Raven 23' when they opened fire on unarmed civilians. Mon 13th

An overcrowded migrant boat capsizes in the Mediterranean off the coast of Libya, a day after leaving North Africa. The Italian coastguard rescues 144 people but up to 400 more are believed to have drowned. Sun 19th

A woman's place

When Tep Vanny's neighbourhood was given over to a private developer and its residents forcibly evicted she launched a seven-year campaign that has landed her in prison twice. She talks to **KIRSTIE BREWER** about protest and graft in modern day Cambodia Sat 11th

Tep Vanny hadn't been born when Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime seized control of Cambodia and forced people from their homes but she worries, 40 years on, that history is repeating itself. According to Christian Aid, government policy has seen more than half of Cambodia's land sold off to private companies since 2008 and tens of thousands of the country's poorest people evicted.

But the poor and dispossessed are fighting back. And women are on the frontline of every protest, with Tep Vanny, a 34-year-old housewife and mother of two, leading the charge. I meet her just a week after her release from Prey Sar prison in Phnom Penh, where she has been serving time for an anti-government protest. We sit and chat outside her house in what is left of the neighbourhood of Boeung Kak. People used to live off the lake here - they fished and worked along a small tourist strip that skirted the shores. Now most of the community has been moved and the lake is a sandy wasteland. In 2007 the government reclassified Boeung Kak from public property to 'state private land' in order to issue a 99-year lease to a private developer. The company, Shukaku, is owned by a senator from the ruling party.

The only thing standing in the way of Shukaku's plans to fill in the lake and build luxury condominiums was the community of 4,000 families who lived around the lake's edge. The families were initially told they would not be



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affected by the development, but soon received eviction notices and had their water and electricity supplies cut off. When a sludge of sand and water began being pumped into the lake people became desperate. It was at this point that Tep threw herself into the fight.

Tep's seven-year campaign took a dramatic turn in November 2014, when she and six other Boeung Kak women – including a 76-year-old grandmother – dragged a large bed frame into a busy boulevard outside City Hall in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh. "Our homes are flooded with sewer water, where do you want us to sleep?" the women asked. The protest culminated in all seven being hauled into police vans.

After a trial that lasted just three hours, the seven women were charged with obstructing traffic under the traffic law, a crime that carried a one-year prison sentence. They would spend five months behind bars and were swiftly joined by three more women who demonstrated outside the courtroom for their release. It was the second time Tep had served a jail sentence for protesting against the government, and it seems unlikely to be her last. "It has done nothing to deter me," she says, at her home in Boeung Kak. "As long as land disputes and social injustices remain we will keep peacefully protesting – even if it sends me back to prison or gets me killed by the authorities."

Older generations have told Tep stories about Pol Pot and the regime that left a quarter of the population dead. In 1975 the communist dictator went in brutal pursuit of returning the country to 'Year Zero', emptying the cities, outlawing money and stripping everyone of their land rights. "Pol Pot used weapons to kill – [but] it is corruption killing people today," she says. "They have changed the strategy, but this government is not so different."

There is a quiet determination about Tep. She speaks softly but with urgency – my translator, Oeur Narit, has to ask her to slow down several times. "We first heard about [the leasing of Boeung Kak] when we saw the news on the TV," Tep recalls. "Nobody came to talk to the villagers who live here." The sand pumping flooded people's homes and wrecked livelihoods. Many of Tep's neighbours took the meagre cash compensation being offered while others accepted relocation 25 kilometres outside of town, away from any schools, healthcare facilities or jobs. Tep and her friends stood firm, winning allies in Hillary Clinton and Cambodia's opposition, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP).

Boeung Kak has become an inspiration for displaced people throughout the country and Tep, with the support of grassroots NGOs, has helped galvanise hundreds of women into action. "This is a woman's struggle. We can do more than wash our husband's clothes," she says. They don't involve men because they want to keep their protests peaceful, and men often encourage violence, she says. Women can use their positions as wives, mothers and grandmothers to disarm riot police – the Boeung Kak women present lotus flowers and sing songs of their suffering at their rallies. They are often still met with aggression and beatings, but their male assailants are morally and publicly shamed for it.

Mu Sochua, a senior CNRP MP and fierce advocate of women's rights, agrees that the sex of the protesters has helped their cause. "Women are the main pillar in the family," she says. "When their land is taken from them, they are left out in the cold so they fight back stronger, louder and with more perseverance." And they are winning small, hard-fought, victories. The plot of land where Tep and the remaining families live has been carved off from the development zone. However, many families were excluded from the concessions and countless more have not been fairly compensated so a huge amount of work remains.

Tep and her fellow protesters lived in squalor while in prison. They slept on the floor with about 100 other inmates, conditions were cramped and it was oppressively hot. Tep slept near the single squat toilet with no door and had to endure months-long water shortages. Sometimes the guards decided to deny all the prisoners their daily time outside and would blame it on the Boeung Kak women for being troublemakers. "The guards would insult us and say if we wanted to get out we could kill ourselves," says Tep. "They have no respect for the rule of law, so we protested."

The women went on hunger strike for 19 days, only stopping after their families pleaded with them to eat. When the guards continued to refuse them fresh air they shouted and banged their heads repeatedly against the wall until they bled and fell unconscious. Meanwhile back in what was left of Boeung Kak, domestic life was in disarray for the women's families, who were terrified for their loved ones. "My husband and parents are proud of me but scared because they know the government doesn't respect human rights," Tep says.

In April, negotiations between CNRP leader Sam Rainsy and prime minister Hun Sen produced a royal



“This is a woman's struggle. We can do more than wash our husband's clothes”

Vital Voices Global Partnership/M. Wiswedel

pardon for the Boeung Kak women, ending their sentence seven months early. The move was part of a new "culture of dialogue" between the warring parties in which the CNRP also ended its ten-month boycott of parliament.

But the fight is far from over. The government's drive to keep up with Asia's development frenzy and attract lucrative investors shows little sign of abating, and officials continue to paint Boeung Kak lake as a deviant place – a shelter for criminals, prostitutes and terrorists – and Tep as a traitor, pandering to the Western world and lacking traditional values. In the eyes of her critics she has dishonoured the *chbab srey*, an age-old code of conduct designed to instil virtue in Cambodian women and which teaches submissiveness and accepting one's lot.

That seems unlikely ever to be Tep's way. After her release from prison, she is turning her sights on the government's proposed law on associations and NGOs (LANGO). If passed into law, LANGO would impose mandatory registration on all associations and NGOs, both foreign and domestic. Its critics fear that the ambiguous term 'associations' could encompass all community organisations and be used to target and cripple grassroots activists in particular. The ministry of the interior would have total discretion over the registration process and any activity by unregistered groups would carry the threat of fines and criminal prosecution. "The state of social and political freedom in Cambodia has taken a deep plunge," says Tep Sothy, another female CNRP MP. "It [the government] drafts laws in line with Chinese laws – where people can do business but can't be critical of their own government."

"I do not want to live under dictatorship and experience the regime under Pol Pot again," says Tep. "There is more and more restriction on freedom of association and expression and we have had the same leader, ideology and leadership style for a very long time." Prime minister Hun Sen, who earlier this year celebrated 30 years in power, has said it is disloyal and "un-Khmer" [un-Cambodian] to oppose the government. Human Rights Watch (HRW) said in a report released in January to mark the anniversary that Cambodia is in the process of slipping backwards into a one-party state.

Forced evictions continue to take place across the country and freedom of speech is struggling for air. The first half of 2015 has already seen more than 3,500 families ask the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association for its help with land disputes. Cambodia, it seems, is still battling with its dark legacy.

Postscript

On 21st July, Oeur Narit, the translator for this piece and a CNRP youth leader, was sentenced to 20 years in prison for his part in a July 2014 demonstration against the closure of Freedom Park, the only protest-designated area in Phnom Penh. His trial was described as "unfair" by HRW; the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights said the verdict was "based on trumped-up charges and characterised by a total disrespect for fair trial rights". Five days later LANGO was passed by Cambodia's senate. ☹

Notes

Apr

Tue
14th

Tue
28th

Wed
15th

Thu
16th

Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari admits that it's possible that **the 277 Chibok schoolgirls taken by Boko Haram a year earlier may never be rescued.**

Fighting erupts on the outskirts of Donetsk, a rebel stronghold in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian troops and rebels report a combined death toll of seven fighters in 24 hours, the highest number since the Minsk ceasefire was signed on 11th February.

An artist goes on trial in Tokyo to face obscenity charges for making a kayak modelled on her genitalia. Megumi Igarashi was arrested in July 2014 after distributing 3D scans of her genitalia in exchange for donations to her project. She says she aims to demystify female sexuality.

"It's a no, I'm afraid"

In a TV debate between five UK opposition leaders, **Labour leader Ed Miliband tells Nicola Sturgeon that his party will not enter a coalition** with her Scottish National Party in the event of a hung parliament.

Officials in Rio de Janeiro admit they have had to remove over 33 tonnes of dead fish from a local lake due to host the rowing and canoeing events at the 2016 Olympic Games.

A pro-Russian journalist is shot dead in Kiev, Ukraine. Oles Buzyna, a supporter of ousted president Viktor Yanukovich, is killed outside his house. The identity of the perpetrators is unknown.

Rank corruption

Cambodia's position on the latest *Corruption Perceptions Index*, released December 2014

154th equal
Chad, DRC

156th equal
Burma, Zimbabwe, Cambodia

159th equal
Burundi
Syria