

DRILL, BABY DRILL!



Takhmau's main claim to fame is as the home of Prime Minister Hun Sen. It received some notoriety not long ago for two foreign paedophile residents. One did time in the town prison¹. The other one, once a famous "glam-rocker", did his time in Vietnam². Now will Takhmau go down as the first victim of "Drill, Baby Drill in Cambodia"? Normally it is the small busy Kandal provincial capital, just 11 km's south of Phnom Penh. Mostly it is quiet, except for when Hun Sen's helicopter flies over. Quiet that is until mid-October when the US Republican presidential campaign refrain "Drill, Baby Drill" suddenly crossed the ocean, to shatter our peace. For those of you in the rest of the country, this may well be a small foretaste of what is to come, but on a much larger scale? Cambodia's has newly discovered reserves of oil and natural gas. They are bound to lead to more "Drill, Baby Drill!" How will ordinary people be treated? Do people in authority have notions of respect or responsibility for ordinary folks, including their health and safety?

Suddenly the Monday before last³, without any prior notice, not even a knock on the door to explain, a drilling rig crew turned up outside our gate in a residential area of Takhmau. They set up on the small vacant plot of land opposite, just a few yards away, and chaos has reigned ever since. We understand they are drilling a water borehole, but no one in authority seems to know, not even the water authority. (Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority⁴). Moreover, when nobody knows, somebody does know, but does not want it to be known he knows. Meanwhile the ordinary folks suffer and are expected to do so in silence.



¹ John Keeler, took lewd pictures of children in Takhmau park and was convicted.

² Gary Glitter, just before he went to Vietnam lived in Takhmau. He was convicted in Vietnam, served a sentence, was forced to return to the UK rather than live abroad.

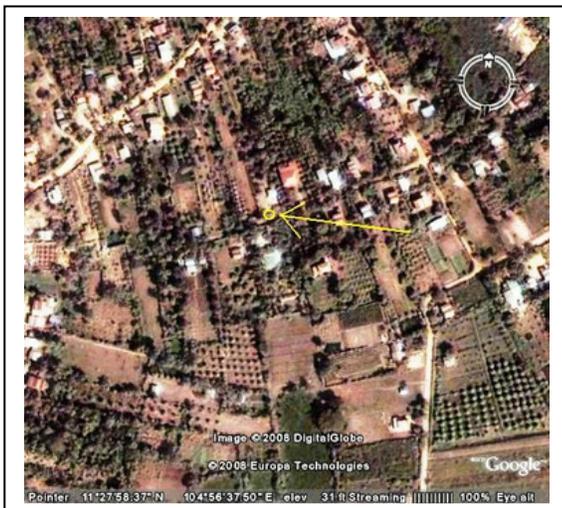
³ 13 October 2008. Work started on 14th, the same day as a letter of complaint was delivered to the Phnom Penh water Authority. Drilling has continued everyday unabated since.

⁴ Letter delivered on 13th plus follow-up e-mails, no answer. Note that on main picture, the PPSWA logo can be seen when enlarged on the shirt of one man.

Day after day, the drilling goes on, accompanied by extreme noise and fumes. Doors and windows have to be kept firmly shut, although the houses of the poorest do not have ones to block out the worst of the noise and smells. Few people know that breathing-in toxic exhaust fumes, for hours on end, can harm their health, especially of their small children. They all sit around seemingly unperturbed, resigned, to watch in total ignorance. Sadly, that ignorance is just as pronounced with the workers. They have to be pitied. Not one of them wears any safety gear. No boots, gloves, hard helmets, or breathing masks. One even nimbly scaled a tree to lop off its top, so that he could move two electric power cables that, by the way, stayed live throughout! He tied the cables to a much more slender tree, and then felled their original host; oblivious to what might happen when these cables fall to the ground, as surely they will in a few days.

The daily din usually goes on from 7.30am to the same time in the evening, interrupted only with mechanical breakdown or some other unanticipated event. The relief, however, does not last for long. Other disturbances soon take over. It would be farcical if it was not so serious, and so sad. When the churning rig does fall silent, there follows swiftly the percussion of heavy hammering for an hour or more. Nighttime, when the men stop work eventually, to sleep in their vehicles, toileting wherever they can (so much for “Water and Sanitation” being a joint ticket in development parlance!), the canine cacophony kicks in. Yes, the pre-election “night of the barking dogs” of July has become a permanent feature of our October! Even the dogs are not allowed to lie and sleep. They warn their owners of the bodily and other movements of the strangers out there.

One evening though we did have a change of sorts. One of the trucks got very stuck in the road. TVs were abandoned as a crowd assembled for a welcome change to their usual home entertainment fare. Cambodians revel in such spectacles. The stuck truck was not the first one to suffer this fate, nor will it be the last, but the show lasted longer, accompanied of course by the usual fanfare of noise and smells. Despite the daily torrential downpours, the drivers usually extract their vehicles with the one and only method they seem to know. “Rev-up and burn rubber”. I suppose the smell of tyres, super-heated from futile spinning, does makes for a change of odour from the usual diet of burnt and unburnt diesel. But here on the second Monday of the October chaos, the method failed. Despite over 2 hours of “Rev-up and burn rubber” practised in all its finest art – until 8.00pm – the wheels ended up well and truly dug-in deep! They had to stay there overnight. Next morning the men brought in a second truck. They attached a cable to



the first one and then we were treated to a double dose of “Rev-up and burn-rubber”. Result? Two trucks even more deeply embedded! The spinning tyres seemed to plunge deeper than the rig had managed after one week of churning. The men did bring in hydraulic jacks, eventually, with building rubble to fill the holes. After 5 hours the two trucks were free, but our once decent laterite surfaced road is now reduced to a muddy quagmire topped with rubble.

The trucks resumed their use for transport and overnight accommodation. The drilling rig, standing idle throughout, resumed its operations. Was it imagination, but did it churn with greater urgency, as

if slighted by the superior burrowing prowess of the trucks? “Drill, Baby Drill!” No doubt the powerful patrons, unlike our Takhmau dogs, are sleeping well at night. They their faith in such technical proficiency intact, and dreams to be realized of the rewards that will soon flow towards them.

It is mystifying how anyone in their right sense would approve sinking a borehole in a residential area, just for water. When it comes to far more lucrative oil or gas yields, there will be far fewer scruples. Why could they not use be alternative free land not far away? Most Cambodian schools and teachers lack the means to teach about water tables, the dangers of excess rates of extraction, and subsequent subsidence of land. These poor folks may survive the intoxication of the fumes, but how will they fare with the inevitable flooding in future years? But then that will be a natural, not man-made disaster, won't it?

John Lowrie

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is not just to express annoyance and helplessness in the face of blatant disregard for others, and to try to preventing such things happening. It raises fundamental issues of how far Cambodia has come and where it is heading. 15 years ago, the parties to the Paris Peace Accords all signed up to “*in view of the recent tragic history of Cambodia, the States participating in the Conference commit themselves to promote and encourage respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Cambodia*”.⁵ Almost 10 years ago, the international community brought “rights-based development” to govern such initiatives. There is much more in this story. Three important questions are posed:

- 1 Are there any codes of conduct, documented standards, to cover any kind of development in Cambodia that affects fundamental rights, freedoms, health, safety and well-being of communities directly affected? Who are the duty-bearers?
- 2 Are there any provisions that seek to assess and establish the equity, distribution and transparency of costs and benefits of such development between developers, authorities, and local/wider communities?

Photo-gallery and CV available.

Photo gallery:

- 1 The scene at the start after the rig was set up.
- 2 The Google Earth view of the area.
- 3 A close up of the PPWSA official in Photo 1 with authority's logo visible. Neighbours believe that he owns or has an interest in this land. An old woman was evicted earlier this year for the plot to be divided and sold.
- 4 The road and one truck after 2 days.
- 5 The first truck stuck.
- 6 Close up of the first truck number plate – still showing international NGO No 844 – are they glad to be associated with such development?
- 7 Our new quagmire and rubble road.

⁵ Final Act of the Paris Conference on Cambodia. Article 12, paragraph 2.