**Excerpt from Cassandra’s forthcoming book CLIMATE OPIUM**

**Paramilitary Violence and REDD Mercenaries against the Chong People in the Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project in Cambodia**

Maybe one day people will say

“Yeah, it’s ugly.
We see the guns.
We see the handcuffs…”

- Ionescu “I.D.” Dragos

Romanian ex-soldier and Wildlife Alliance REDD ranger on the Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project

Although touted as one of the world’s flagship carbon offset projects,² the Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project in Cambodia’s lush rainforest sounds more like a counterinsurgency campaign than a solution to global warming. Since 2015, as part of the half a million-hectare REDD+ project,⁴ the US-based NGO Wildlife Alliance⁵ and the Ministry of Environment of the Royal Government of Cambodia carried out paramilitary operations⁶ against the Indigenous Chong People and farmers with heavily armed REDD rangers, military police,⁷ and even Eastern

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3. Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project – Southern Cardamom REDD+


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European former soldiers, who herald the emerging phenomenon of REDD mercenaries. Cognizant that REDD paramilitarism is not a good look, Ionescu “I.D.” Dragos, a Romanian ex-soldier and Wildlife Alliance REDD ranger on the Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project told the *South China Morning Post* video journalists that “Maybe one day people will say ‘Yeah, it’s ugly. We see the guns. We see the handcuffs…””

In 2024, after a two-year, in-depth investigation into such ugliness, the Nobel Prize laureate Human Rights Watch published its ground-breaking report entitled *Carbon Offsetting’s Casualties: Violations of Chong Indigenous People’s Rights in Cambodia’s Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project.* The report documents a litany of human rights abuses. These abuses span violent “forced evictions” of Indigenous People from their ancestral land, arbitrary house searches, arrests, physical abuse, detention, and unjust imprisonment for months without trial. It is worth noting that, under international law, in the case of Indigenous Peoples, what is often referred to as “forced evictions” actually constitute forced relocations in or from their territory.

Prior to Human Rights Watch’s report, courageous journalists had exposed how the Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project’s paramilitary violence also burned and demolished homes, destroyed farms, terrorized and persecuted communities, generated land conflicts and confrontations, criminalized Indigenous traditional lifestyles and swidden agriculture,

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12 SourceMaterial and Anton Delgado. *Singapore’s ‘blueprint for disaster’ threatens global climate targets* ([source-material.org](http://source-material.org)) October 9, 2023.
undermined farmers’ and Indigenous livelihoods\textsuperscript{15} and their capacity to feed themselves, as well as burned crops, food\textsuperscript{16} and subsistence tools.\textsuperscript{17} Little wonder that Sen Voleak, a woman who lives in the village of Chi Phat, told SourceMaterial that Wildlife Alliance’s REDD rangers were making it hard to survive.\textsuperscript{18}

The testimonies of the Chong People are chillingly reminiscent of imperialist wars in South East Asia. One Chong man told Human Rights Watch about when he was attacked by heavily armed REDD rangers: “They first rushed into the camp, they hit me in the back with their gun. They destroyed everything I had with me – even the clothes on my back.”\textsuperscript{19} A young woman from Praly commune, who prefers to remain anonymous for her own protection, told Human Rights Watch that, in March 2021, while farming on her ancestral land when she was pregnant, she was arrested by five men including one foreigner, some of whom carried guns.\textsuperscript{20} The REDD rangers told her to get on the back of the foreinger’s motorbike or she would be handcuffed.\textsuperscript{21} Frightened, she complied, but to escape, she flung herself off the foreigner’s moving motorbike, imperiling her baby.\textsuperscript{22}

Despite years of such testimonies, the founder and CEO of Wildlife Alliance Dr. Suwanna Gauntlett parrots REDD propaganda claiming that REDD is “good for forests, good for indigenous peoples, good for wildlife, and crucial for tackling climate change.”\textsuperscript{23} REDD Monitor notes that, ironically, “Wildlife Alliance attacks local farmers and Indigenous Peoples, but work[ed] with, and defends, the direct cause of deforestation in Cambodia: the utterly corrupt

\textsuperscript{18} SourceMaterial and Anton Delgado. Singapore’s ‘blueprint for disaster’ threatens global climate targets (source-material.org) October 3, 2023.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.


“Wildlife Alliance has been playing a major role in preserving and reforesting 1.4 million hectares of the Cardamom Rainforest in Cambodia under the REDD+ standard for carbon forest offsets...”
[36-year-old] Hun Sen dictatorship.” Southern Cardamom REDD+ carbon credits and greenwash, stained by the suffering of the Chong People and subsistence farmers, have been bought by companies such as Bayer, Delta Air Lines, Air France, Gucci, Stella McCartney, InterFace, Macquarie Group, SeaTrees, Deliveroo, and Boeing.

REDD does NOT grant land rights
All over the world, REDD proponents are pretending that REDD can be a vehicle for Indigenous Peoples to get their land rights. However, REDD is not a viable means of achieving real land rights. In the case of the Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project, although promises of land rights were used to trick communities into accepting the REDD+ project, no land rights were granted. Human Rights Watch reports that “the REDD+ project staff initially told reluctant community members that the project would assist them in gaining land titles, only to later concede in a 2021 audit that the project could not in fact confer land titles...” Furthermore, according to Radio Free Asia, “in Thmor Donpove commune, comprising two Chong villages, Wildlife Alliance tried to block 1,851 hectares from being titled for villagers, claiming the land was forest land.” Make no mistake about it, REDD does NOT grant land rights. On the contrary, it takes land and land rights away.

In a pickle because of the Southern Cardamom REDD+ project’s deplorable human rights record, the carbon credit verifier Verra, which oversees half the global market, suspended the project in 2023, after selling more than 27.6 million carbon credits, which supposedly “supported Indigenous Peoples’ rights,” for over 60 million dollars. Despite its multimillion dollar profits, according to Human Rights Watch, the REDD+ project “does not have a benefit-sharing

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26 Ibid.
agreement with any of the communities included in the project” and was never granted communities’ free, prior, informed consent.33

Bad Company
In a blow to a key global REDD promoter, Human Rights Watch implicated Wildlife Alliance's technical REDD+ investor and adviser, Wildlife Works Carbon,34 in the human rights abuses of the Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project.35 Wildlife Works Carbon’s own REDD projects are also rife with human rights abuses.36 For example, Wildlife Works Carbon’s celebrated Kasigau Corridor REDD+ Project in Kenya was denounced by the Kenya Human Rights Commission for extensive sexual violence against women,37 and has shamefully served to drum up support for the State of California’s international REDD plans with a third of the world’s tropical forests.

Abducted Grandmother saved from REDD Goons by Motorbike Gang of Wedding Guests
A moment of glorious resistance to the Southern Cardamom REDD+ Project, worthy of being immortalized in a star-studded movie, was vividly recounted by SourceMaterial.38 In 2021, while peacefully tending her rice paddy and cashew trees, the 62-year-old grandmother Meng Sotear was abducted by armed REDD rangers and thrown aboard a motorbike to transport her to their lair. Fortunately, when Chief Huang Pou and some 40 other wedding guests saw the distraught grandmother speeding by, they called an abrupt end to the festivities, leapt aboard their own motorbikes, and raced off in all their flowers and finery to save her. In the resulting confrontation, Meng was freed by her neighbors, but there have been many other clashes between villagers and armed REDD rangers in the remote Southern Cardamom mountains that have not had such happy endings.39

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34 Wildlife Works. https://www.wildlifeworks.com/
37 “One of the focal cases involves U.S. company Wildlife Works Carbon (WWC), which denied the accusations. The company obtained a large land concession in order to protect a forest from loggers, and uses a share of the money earned from selling carbon credits to benefit people living there, said president Mike Karchinsky… But Sotearer said local communities, which signed agreements with the company, were not properly consulted, and claimed the project had hindered their farming and other activities.”
38 Source Material. ‘Blueprint for disaster’, Singapore’s ‘blueprint for disaster’ threatens global climate targets (source-material.org) October 9, 2023.
39 Ibid.
In its report, Human Rights Watch notes that several villagers were open to partnering with the REDD+ project if the violence stopped. However, given the repeated violations of free, prior, informed consent, it is doubtful that all the Chong People and farmers know that the project allows corporate polluters to continue polluting, which makes the climate crisis worse, thus endangering their beloved forest and rice paddies.

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41 Ibid.