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Om Yentieng's 'Wife' Implicated in Timber Deal

by Thet Sambath and Solana Pyne | April 16, 2004

oral district, Kompong Speu province – A woman who said she was the wife of a top government official contracted the purchase of 4.3 cubic meters of luxury timber from villagers within Oral Wildlife Sanctuary and used a forestry official to procure and transport the wood, villagers and forestry officials said.

The timber was confiscated

Feb 11 by rangers trained and supported by the NGO Conservation International at the Thpong district forestry station, forestry officials in Thpong and Ou Taong said Monday. The villagers said they were never paid.

Om Yentieng, an adviser on human rights to Prime Minister Hun Sen, said the reports were untrue. "I would like to deny any reports that my wife is involved in timber purchasing," he said Tuesday.

Pong Sokit, chief of Ou Taong village inside Oral Wildlife Sanctuary, said Monday he was the middleman for the deal, first proposed by Phan Pheary, head of forestry for Sangke Sartob commune, which abuts the wildlife sanctuary.

"Pheary first came to contact me in early February to buy the wood," Pong Sokit said. "He said he was going to buy it for Om Yentieng's wife."

Then, he said, Om Yentieng's wife came to the village with two bodyguards and Phan Pheary on the day before the confiscation.

Six villagers as well as a forestry official and soldiers reported seeing or hearing about the visit. They said the woman was small and pretty with medium-toned skin.

"She asked me," Pong Sokit said. "She said she needed to buy wood, nice wood, beng. And that she wanted big pieces of wood."

He took her to the homes of six local families who had cut beng, a species of luxury timber, he said. Sum Mith, one of six villagers who sold wood to the woman, said she came to his house and looked at the wood.

She had lunch there and told those she met that she needed the wood for a window and a door at her house, he said, but she added that her husband didn't know about her excursion.

She agreed to buy the timber for nearly $1,500 after the visit, Pong Sokit and Sum Mith said.