

Time to review land policy: NA members

Members of the Lao National Assembly (NA) have urged the government to reform national land policy to ensure sustainable development of the nation.

The comments were made at the 9th ordinary session of the 6th legislature of the NA in Vientiane yesterday in response to rising concerns over land use and land grabbing by wealthy individuals and companies.

Individuals or companies who own large plots of land often demand exorbitant compensation when the government wishes to reclaim the land for commercial development projects.

NA members also raised concerns over the increasing number of conflicts caused by land rights, particularly amongst family members.

Dr Khoukeo Akhamontry, NA member for the 13th constituency in Savannakhet province, said it is time for the NA to debate possible reforms to national land policies.

He said the assembly had a role and duty to reform land policy in order to revise the rights of Lao citizens to use and occupy land.

Land belongs to the Lao national family, which the government represents, not individuals, he said.

Mr Ousavanh Thepvongsa, NA member for the 2nd constituency in Phongsaly province, told media that reforms to land policy should aim to define exactly what Lao people can do with the land they occupy.

He said Lao citizens should not use agricultural land for purposes other than growing rice and cash crops.

People who use land for purposes other than that accorded by its classification must be heavily taxed, he said.

Mr Ousavanh said any reforms to land policy should wait until the government has completed a national land survey and classified land areas.

He said that zoning land would make it easier for the government to manage investment projects; for example, a factory which produces chemical substances should not be built close to a residential area or farmland.

Laos introduced its first land management policy in 1986 after abolishing a centrally planned economy and moving to a market oriented financial system.

The Party and government introduced a policy to allow Lao citizens to use the land they occupy to operate businesses, generating income and jobs.

The government has issued land titles for Lao citizens, which can be transferred, used as a share in a joint venture and as bank loan guarantees.

However there is currently a lack of clear definition as to exactly what can and can't be done on land plots, making it difficult for the government to develop land in accordance with its potential.

Large areas of agricultural land have been lost in recent years as businesses purchase land from farmers to construct commercial buildings, threatening food security and hindering government plans to develop the nation's food processing industry.

By Ekaphone Phouthonesy