

As prices rise, workers go foraging

Written by Sam Rith

WEDNESDAY, 22 OCTOBER 2008

Food prices have doubled since last year, but factory wages have remained static. In response, many garment workers have started foraging for food in a bid to save some cash

FORAGING for food is an increasingly popular weekend pursuit for garment workers feeling the pinch due to the spiraling cost of goods.

"This year, my livelihood has got so much worse," said Vang Phanna, 20, a garment worker who was collecting water hyacinth in a pond in the Dangkor district of Phnom Penh.



Photo by: TRACEY SHELTON

"The price of food has doubled since," she said, adding that the price of rice went up from 1,200 to 2,800 riels (US\$0.30 to \$0.70) per kilo this year. Garment factory workers are increasingly feeling the pinch with food prices double what they were last year.

To avoid spending too much of her \$50-a-month salary on food, Vang Phanna and her friends now go every weekend to forage for snails, crabs and wild vegetables in the fields around the garment factory that employs them.

"I spend all of my monthly salary on food, rent, electricity and water," Vang Phanna said, adding that were she not to forage, she would spend a disproportionate percentage on food.

Teng Srey, 18, one of Vang Phanna's colleagues, has been trying to reduce her living expenses by sharing a room with six other garment workers and reducing the number of times she travels back to visit her family in Kampong

Chhnang province.

"It is not only food prices but also bus ticket prices that have doubled this year," she said, adding that she used to spend 5,000 riels for a bus fare back home but now she has to pay 10,000 riels for the same ticket.

Barely enough

While in past years Teng Srey prided herself on being able to send part of her salary home to support her family in the province, nowadays her salary is barely enough to support herself.

"Last year I was able to save some money to send back home to support my other three siblings to study. This year I have sent nothing. What I earned was just enough for me to survive."

"I don't know whether my three siblings had to postpone their studies because I haven't had the money to visit them for the last few months."

Sam Ath, 33, who has been working in a Phnom Penh garment factory for the last two years, said that last year she used to be able to send US\$20 per month to her parents in Takeo province.

"Since the beginning of this year, I haven't sent anything to my parents," she said.

The total number of employees in the garment industry stands at approximately 350,000. Most garment workers come to Phnom Penh from the provinces to work in the city's factories.

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