

## ENCROACHMENT

# Rubber trees in protected forests felled

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**PHITSANULOK:** About 500 forestry officials began clearing rubber trees in forest reserve zones yesterday as part of the Royal Forest Department's campaign to curb encroachment.

Boonchob Sutthamanuswong, the Royal Forest Department chief, said his agency would stand firm with its policy to stop encroachment on national forests by big investors wanting to use the land for commercial purposes.

The campaign targets encroachers who have paid local people occupying the land to move out so it can be cultivated for cash crops on a commercial scale.

"We will not take legal action against the local people as they can still live in the forest under the cabinet's resolution of June 30, 1998. These people need small pieces of land to make a living," Mr Sutthamanuswong said.

According to Section 22 of the National Reserved Forest Law BE 2507, the authority is empowered to demolish any buildings or other objects constructed or planted inside national forest reserves without state permission.

Mr Boonchob said Section 22 can be enforced immediately on encroached land. Demolition could be completed four to



Boonchob Sutthamanuswong, chief of the Royal Forest Department, fells a rubber tree in the Nern Perm National Forest in Nakhon Thai district in Phitsanulok. Yesterday's event kicked off the 'Return Forest Land to the Forest' project which aims to crack down on forest encroachment by various groups, including rubber farmers.

five months after the department announces its plan to clear the land.

In cases where encroachers laid claim to ownership of the land, the eviction process could take longer — possibly several years — as officials will have to follow the legal process.

The department will try to explain to the local people that they were not the target of the eviction campaign to prevent possible resistance, Mr Boonchob said.

At the launch of yesterday's campaign, forestry officials, soldiers and local administrative staff felled rubber trees

on 65 rai of encroached land in Nern Perm's forest reserve in Nakhon Thai district. The rubber trees were believed to have been planted there since 2008.

Based on the department's records, there have been 531 cases of forest encroachment since 2008 in Phitsanulok, covering an area of 11,653 rai. Sixteen of the cases involved big-time investors.

Phitsanulok has 13 forest reserve zones covering 3.2 million rai of land. The department will review its data to separate local people from new encroachers while undertaking the eviction campaign.