

A Response to the New Year Parade Statement

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On Wednesday, January 9, 2008, the Cambodian New Year Parade Committee had a meeting to continue the parade planning. At this meeting, they passed out a press release entitled "Objectives of Cambodian New Year Parade." Even though the press release does not acknowledge the expressed outrage against the invitation given to Sok An, the Deputy Prime Minister of Cambodia, the language and points made in the writing functions as a rebuttal and justification for the invitation. The press release begins by discussing a policy of non-discrimination and the final paragraph opens with the statement, "We know that the current Cambodian government is not perfect, but we believe in open dialogs and making changes through peaceful means as taught by Dr. Martin Luther King." The statement that the Cambodian government is not perfect is an allusion to and an acknowledgement of the destructive practices of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), a corrupt and oppressive government that is presently controlling Cambodia. To use the phrase "not perfect" to describe the CPP is an understatement. This is a government that has engaged in numerous violations of human rights and the oppression of the Cambodian nation including the murders of journalists who dared to speak against them. CPP polices have mistreated and used violence against villagers to evict them from their land. Having an official member of this government in the parade is tantamount to condoning their actions and turning a blind eye to the injustice that occurs in Cambodia, injustices that are committed by the current government.

A parade does not offer the opportunity to discuss or have "open dialog". A discussion forum is needed for an open dialog to be possible and effective. If the Cambodian New Year Parade Committee and Cambodia Town is interested in creating an open dialog to encourage changes through peaceful means, they should create an event that is separate from the parade. In opening this dialog, they should invite CPP government officials, representatives from the Cambodian Center for Human Right (CCHR) (<http://www.cchr-cambodia.org/en/>), organizations that work to eliminate human right violations, and members of the community.

The open dialog topics that need to be addressed with the government of Cambodia are human right issues and freedom of expression, to name a few. The CCHR has implemented many forums in Cambodia to engage in open dialogs and could provide recommendations on how to do this.

The parade is not a place for “open dialog” because it is not a forum discussion. The majority of the community is participating as spectator and the government official would be sitting on a float waving to spectators who are attending the parade to celebrate Cambodian New Year and culture. The people sitting in these floats should be inspirational figures who bring pride and joy to the community. A member of a corrupted government can only bring forth anger and resentment in a time for celebration.

The director of CCHR, Virak Ou received the 2007 Reeboks Human Rights Award for Young Activists for his human rights work in Cambodia. He was one of four recipients to receive the award worldwide. This is something that the Cambodian community is proud of and this is the person that should be invited to attend the Cambodian New Year Parade. He represents open dialog and change through peaceful mean. To learn more about his work, click on this link:

<http://www.reebok.com/Static/global/initiatives/rights/awards/recipients/virak.html>

I believe Dr. Martin Luther King would be willing to meet with oppositional figure to create open dialog and understanding, but I cannot imagine that he would invite members of the Ku Klux Klan to participate in a parade celebrating the African-American community as a mean of encouraging open dialog.

Below is the press release that the Cambodian New Year Committee passed out on January 9, 2008

Objectives of Cambodian New Year Parade

LONG BEACH, CA -The new Year Parade committee has a policy of non-discrimination for participation in the parade. The parade’s main objectives are to promote the Cambodian culture, area businesses, and particularly Cambodia Town. Political slogans and election campaigns are strictly prohibited.

We have followed the official US policy in dealing with the Cambodian government which is recognized by all nations in the world. We believe past parades have made major impacts on the participating Cambodian officials: to witness the joy and pride of Long Beach Cambodian-Americans, and the personal freedom that people enjoy under US laws. High Cambodian officials who have participated in the past parades and celebrations include: Sokha Kem (NGO Human Right Activists), H.E. Than Pok (former-secretary of state), H.E. Vora Khunthoul (Secretary of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs), H.E. Sin Neung (Parliament Member), H.E. Chang Song (Senator), H.E. Widhya Chem

(Ambassador to UN), H.E. Sreywath Ek (Ambassador to USA), and Cambodian Rice Miller Association.

We know the current Cambodian government is not perfect, but we believe in open dialogs and making changes through peaceful means as taught by Dr. Martin Luther King. We will continue to invite the Cambodian government regardless of the officials' political party to participate in the parade because the parade will help promote freedom and democracy in Cambodia.

A petition to protest the parade has been circulated online and within the community, but a group of my friends and colleagues have decided to create a shorter one. We also want to obtain the support of people outside of the Cambodian community and write the petition with them in mind as they may not know anything about Cambodia or the reasons for our protest. This is a human rights issues and it requires attention and support from all members of society. Having more than one petition is acceptable. Even though, it serves the same purpose, people may want to express themselves differently. You can choose to sign either one or write your own. The existing petition can serve as a guideline.

Please download, sign the petition, and get as many signatures as possible:

<http://navyphim.com/SokAnPetition.pdf>

Email me for further instruction on where to send the petition: