PRESS RELEASE

CCHR published quarterly report on its Public Forums:

Land grabbing and evictions have become human rights issue no. 1 for Cambodian villagers – Kem Sokha criticizes National Authority for the Resolution of Land Disputes for being inactive

Phnom Penh, July 3rd, 2006

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) alerts the Cambodian and international public that land grabbing and evictions have become the most widespread and one of the most pressing human rights problems in Cambodia. This is the main result of the report on the 16 Public Forums that CCHR conducted in the second quarter of 2006. A total of 8,441 citizens attended these events. 3,020 (35%) of them were women. The Public Forums of CCHR give grassroots people opportunities to talk freely about human rights violations and other issues of public concern. At each forum from 15 to 30 villagers speak for five minutes in front of representatives from local authorities, Members of Parliament from the main political parties and NGOs. From October 2003 to June 2006, CCHR has organized 145 Public Forums with a total of 89,549 participants. That makes an average of 617 participants per event.

Between end of March and end of June, 329 the participants of the Public Forums went to the microphones for making statements. 87 or 29 per cent of these speakers were women. 215 or 65 per cent of these statements predominantly referred to land conflicts. Eight per cent of the statements mainly focused on poverty and seven per cent on corruption. All other topics were mentioned even less often. Therefore, land conflicts have become human rights and social problem no. 1 for Cambodian villagers. CCHR even has monitored an increasing tendency compared to the previous year. At the Public Forums organized in the last quarter of 2005 around 35 per cent of the speakers mostly shared concerns about land disputes (and 45 per cent spoke about rights and democracy). In the first quarter of 2006, about 58 per cent of the active participants raised the issue of land conflicts.

These land conflicts happened on various levels: between citizens and citizens, citizens and the local authorities, citizens and powerful people or companies. But on all levels most of the statements included criticism of the government for having neglected the rights of the poor like, for example, the right to adequate housing and the right to food. The authorities or individual officials were also accused of an intransparent and inconsistent land management, of not having consulted the needs of the affected population, or of being corrupt.

The most serious land conflicts that were reported by the villagers involved private companies that bought land from the state or received concessions. Poor Cambodian citizens have settled on these lands or used them for a long time but never got a legal title for it. The following examples are some of the cases that were discussed on Public Forums organized by CCHR:

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- Dakdam Commune, Auraing District, Mondulkiri Province, on March 31, 2006: Ethnic Phnong villagers mostly criticized that the economic concession given to the Chinese Wushinzan company for a pine tree plantation of estimated 30,000 hectares—the legal maximum being 10,000 hectares. Employees of the company were accused of having "destroyed a grove with ancestral graves" and having "intimidated villagers". Top government officials were suspected of having accepted bribes.

- Ta Mas Pagoda, Sleng Village, Chrey Vean Commune, Prey Chhor District, Kampong Cham Province, June 10, 2006: More than 200 families complained that two private companies encroached around 4,000 hectares planted by villagers with root crops and fruit trees since 1979. The companies claimed to have authorization from the higher government but documents showed the companies were allowed only for 1,500 and 1,200 hectares.

- Chouk Va Pagoda, Andong Village, Sangkat Kork Roka, Khan Dangkao, Phnom Penh, June 15, 2006: People living at a nearby relocation site complained about having been "evicted by crude police force" from their former homes in the Tonle Bassac Community in the center of the capital on June 6. The land of their village, about six hectares, was bought by the private construction company Sour Srun. Speakers also criticized that the Phnom Penh City Hall planned to give some of the relocated families plots of land as compensation whereas other long-term residents of the village were refused. Speakers from the about 1,500 families said that there is not enough shelter, food, clean water and health care.

- Boeung Preav Village, Boeung Preav Commune, Sre Ambel District, Koh Kong Province, June 17, 2006: Around 22 families complained that a private company started to clear land in May 2006 for sugar cane plantation affecting the land they tilled and other neighboring villages. The company is reportedly planning to invest on a plantation of 20,000 hectares.

The President of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, Kem Sokha, commented the outcomes of CCHR's Public Forums in the following way: "The land conflicts affect the very existence of large numbers of poor and desperate Cambodians. Those people may hardly defend their rights and interests against the rich who can buy public land by bribing officials. The eviction of whole rural or urban communities causes more misery and suffering in our country. But we want to see a consistent and transparent policy of development and land management that benefits the poor population as well. Unfortunately, the National Authority for the Resolution of Land Disputes that was founded under the auspices of Deputy Prime Minister Sok An was inactive. It does not have the political will to take action against serious cases of land grabbing that involve high-ranking officials, generals or the owners of big companies."

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