Dear Editor,

I write in response to your article in The Phnom Penh Post on 25 May 2011 titled “Agriculture exports to fuel China trade goal”. Minister of Commerce, Cham Prasidh, said that Cambodia intends to increase exports of agricultural products such as rice and rubber to China. The Royal Government of Cambodia (the “RGC”) has previously stated that it aims to increase overall exports to China in a bid to push bilateral trade to US$2.5 billion in 2012 – an increase of more than 25% on 2010.

China is already the biggest source of foreign direct investment in Cambodia – accounting for a cumulative US$8 billion by the end of 2010 – and one of the main attractions of Chinese investment is that it is said to come with “no strings attached”. China turns a blind eye to human rights violations in Cambodia, showing no inclination to leverage its position of authority to demand political reform and respect for human rights in return for its investment. However, it is clear there are in fact strings attached to Chinese trade and investment: in return for investing in Cambodia’s development, China expects free rein in Cambodia both politically and economically, with Chinese companies having unfettered access to Cambodia’s wealth of untapped natural resources. Even now, over 20% of companies extracting minerals in Cambodia are Chinese, while the Chinese government is funding railway links and other infrastructure projects throughout South East Asia to ensure easy access to ports on the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

However, as well as condoning existing human rights violations by its silence, Chinese investment is actively devastating Cambodian families and communities: poor people in both urban and rural areas are being evicted from their land with paltry compensation to make way for rampant development in the form of shopping malls, luxury housing estates and hotels, as foreign development companies and Cambodian politicians take advantage of soaring real estate prices and a lack of adequate land titling – a legacy of the Khmer Rouge years. Already more than 2,600 families – and the final figure is likely to be more than 4,000 – have been evicted from the Boeung Kak lake area in Phnom Penh on the back of a joint venture development project initiated by Shukaku Inc. – owned by ruling party senator Lao Meng Khin – and Inner Mongolia Erdos Hung Jun Investment Company – a Chinese company. According to the Housing Rights Task Force, a frightening 150,000 Cambodians are expected to be evicted from their land over the course of 2011, with up to 80,000 in Phnom Penh alone.

Human rights abuses have even become integral to the trade negotiations themselves: in December 2009, two days after Cambodia deported 20 Muslim Uighurs who had sought asylum in Cambodia after fleeing ethnic violence in China – to international condemnation – the Chinese vice-president arrived in Phnom Penh to sign 14 trade deals worth billions of dollars.

The RGC is abusing its mandate, taking from the poor and giving to the rich, while lining its own pockets along the way. In the 1993 UN-sponsored elections, Cambodians turned out to vote in force – conclusive proof of the people’s desire for democracy. Instead, they have been cursed with a Chinese-sponsored kleptocracy. No one should be under any illusions as to whether Chinese trade and investment comes “with strings attached”: there are strings, and they will trigger far worse consequences than strings relating to human rights and democracy. Unless Chinese investors stop...
abusing Cambodians in greedy and ruthless pursuit of their own business operations – and the RGC stops bowing to Chinese corporate and political pressure – Cambodians will continue to suffer, to the detriment of Cambodian society as a whole.

Ou Virak, President
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