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Cambodia Takes Another Step Towards Land Reform with Eligibility of Nearly 100,000 Families for Hard Titles

After canceling four economic land concessions (“ELCs”) in environmentally sensitive Prey Lang forest that were to be issued to private commercial interests, the Royal Government of Cambodia (the “RGC”) has shown once again that it is taking steps that will bring about much-needed land reform. The RGC recently announced that nearly 100,000 families have been identified as being eligible for hard land titles, and that hundreds of thousands more eligible families will also be identified. (The Cambodian Daily, Thursday, 9 August 2012, pp 1-2).

Having a history of placing commercial and economic interests at the top of its agenda, the RGC must be congratulated for now taking not just one, but two encouraging steps towards meeting its promise of 7 May 2012 to act more to protect its people than it has in the past concerning its land reform policies. In a policy statement on 14 June 2012, Prime Minister Hun Sen gave the Cambodian people further reason for encouragement when he confirmed that illegally-administered ELCs would be revoked, and that appropriate land titles would be reserved for Cambodian people. “Our plan is to measure the land of more than 350,000 families on 1.2 million hectares of land in order to give citizens the safety of owning their land,” Mr. Hun Sen stated.

Although people were hopeful, what happened next raised some questions about the RGC’s new direction as regards land reforms, such as whether it is at all serious about its stated commitment to reforms.

For example, the RGC silenced a critic who vocally questioned the RGCs commitment to such reforms, and who they viewed as possibly causing problems in their enacting their policies. Sia Pheurn, Secretariat of Housing Rights Task Force, was reportedly warned by The Cambodia Democracy Student Coalition and Student Association – an RGC-affiliated organization – to immediately stop his criticism of government policy concerning its use of inexperienced student volunteers instead of civil servants to measure land as a necessary step towards establishing ownership boundaries.

The RGC can advance its stated goals and make meaningful land reform policies by providing hard titles to land for all Cambodian people, in accordance with the rule of law. In doing so, the RGC would serve to show that it is also serious about encouraging foreign and domestic investment, since few companies are currently willing to take the risk of investing in Cambodia. One cannot help but be encouraged by these recent positive events as regards reform of Cambodia’s land sector; however, one cannot lose sight of the fact that many challenges remain, and there is much still to
be done by the RGC as it sets itself on its new course towards bringing the Cambodian people control over their properties, their lives, and their futures.

**Vann Sophath, Land Reform Project Coordinator for CCHR, makes the following comments about these issues:**

“I believe that the determination of the boundaries of land ownership must be a fair and transparent process. The government should ensure that the students who are taking the land measurements have input from the people making claims to their land ownership so that the students can consider where to measure the boundaries, and not have to rely on instructions given to them only by the government”, states Mr. Vann.

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**Note to the Editor:**

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