

(This is translation of the official letter which was sent separately to H.E. Sar Kheng)

H.E. Sar Kheng

Deputy Minister, Minister of Interior
Ministry of Interior,
Phnom Penh, Kingdom of Cambodia

7 November 2012

Open Letter Regarding Discriminatory Comments Made in Relation to the Removal of Thmar Kaul Village Chief Surn Savoeun

Dear Minister,

I write to you regarding the removal of Surn Savoeun from her position as the Cambodian People's Party ("CPP") chief of Thmar Kaul village in Choam Chao commune in Phnom Penh earlier this month and in particular recent comments regarding her removal made by the deputy commune chief. Surn Savoeun was removed from her position as village chief on 5 October 2012, supposedly due to her refusal to assist in the eviction of families from their homes in Thmar Kaul village. These evictions are being called for by the Royal Government of Cambodia ("RGC") because the homes are in what the RGC has declared a security "buffer zone" around Phnom Penh International Airport for the upcoming Association of Southeast Asian Nations ("ASEAN") and East Asia summits.

Despite earlier statements that clearly indicated Ms. Savoeun's removal was in relation to the evictions, according to a 1 November 2012 article published in The Cambodia Daily ("Residents Say Village Chief 'Unfairly Removed'"), Choam Chao deputy commune chief Var Sarang stated on 31 October 2012 that the commune "*did not remove Ms. Savoeun, we are just letting her take a rest from her job to learn how to do more work because she doesn't understand administrative affairs. We have now prepared a job for her at women's affairs in the village.*" Comments such as these are highly discriminatory and indicate that, while she has been removed from her position because of her principled stance on the evictions (whether or not grounded in the law is beyond the scope of this letter), she is now being punished a second time by being painted as incompetent due to her being a woman. Not only is it very unlikely that she was in fact incompetent, given the circumstances, but this explanation is patronizing and based on incorrect and damaging gender stereotypes. Furthermore, I am concerned that the injustice of this woman's treatment and the infringement upon her rights will act as a deterrent to ambitious and capable women – of which there are plenty in Cambodia – entering into Cambodian politics, where they are sorely needed.

Despite commitments to promote women's political representation made through the Cambodian Millennium Development Goals ("CMDGs") and various national policy documents, women continue to be underrepresented at all levels of government in Cambodia. If the RGC is to achieve the targets established by the CMDGs, the RGC needs to actively demonstrate its commitment to upholding gender equality by promoting and protecting women in politics – and to not allow discriminatory practices that only serve to further undermine women's participation in politics. I trust that you will ensure that appropriate disciplinary action is taken against Mr. Sarang in order to ensure that this is not repeated.

Yours sincerely,

Ou Virak
President

CC:

- Samdech Techo Hun Sen (Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia)
- Soth Sath (Commune Chief, Choam Chao Commune, Phnom Penh)
- Lokchumteav Ing Kuntha Phavy (President of Cambodian National Council for Women (CNCW), Minister of Women Affairs)