



## MEDIA STATEMENT

23 Jan 2013

### Situation of Land/Housing Rights and Activists in 2012 and the Way Forward

Major NGOs and community representatives today called for sustainable and inclusive land and housing reforms, in a media conference at which issues such as forced evictions, the impact of landlessness and the position of land and housing activists in Cambodia were discussed.

The heads of The Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC), the Cambodian Human Rights Development Association (ADHOC), the NGO Forum on Cambodia and the Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF) called on the Royal Government of Cambodia to take measures to support Cambodia’s poor and vulnerable people in regard to land and housing improvements.

The RGC recognizes that land reform is vital to enhance social stability and to meet the overall goal of poverty reduction. Yet many issues need to be addressed.

Escalating numbers of poor and vulnerable people are being driven from their land. Forced evictions have degraded the livelihoods of communities.

Since 2000 at least 700,000 people across the country have been affected by land grabbing and forced displacement, including 51,000 people in 2011. In Phnom Penh at least 145,000, or approximately 10% of the city’s population, have been evicted since 2000. At the end of 2011 almost 40,000 residents were under immediate threat of eviction.

Communities are increasingly at risk of forced evictions and inadequate compensation, said Mr Sia Phearum, HRTF Secretariat Chief.

“In addition to the Boeng Kak Lake evictions, serious housing rights violations occurred in early 2012 at Borey Keila community”, he said.

Community speakers also spoke outlining their own experiences of violations of human rights which have occurred at Boeng Kak Lake and Koh Kong Province.

Mr Chhith Sam Ath, Executive Director of the NGO Forum on Cambodia, said that there was an urgent need to improve the position of Cambodia’s most vulnerable in regard to land possession.

“It is vital that we see progress in these areas in Cambodia. Currently landlessness is estimated at between 20-25% of the total population.”

While land grabbing is the critical issue, there are also concerns over the effects of large scale foreign investments in agriculture and agri-business through the granting of Economic Land Concessions (ELCs).

“We need greater transparency on the issues of which ELCs are still proceeding, despite the Government’s stated moratorium on these”, said Mr Sok Sam Oeun, CHRAC Chairman.

It is vital that RGC ensures that the announced review of ELCs is carried out in a transparent and participatory way and that information is made publicly available.

NGOs expressed great concern over the position of land and housing rights activists. During 2012 increasing arrests and human rights violations occurred as communities sought to save their homes.

“We call on the Government to release Ms Yorm Bopha, land and housing rights activist and former Boeng Kak Lake resident, recently jailed for three years for her involvement in trying to protect the community’s homes and gain adequate compensation after the government leased their land for development, “ said ADHOC President Mr Thun Saray.

Speakers acknowledged that the Government’s initiatives in land reform and Executive Order 01 are timely and laudable, but there are challenges in implementation. Clearance of crops and land encroachment by companies still occur. Indigenous people are particularly disadvantaged. There is a need for prioritizing systematic land registration for poor communities in provinces and cities where disputes occur, avoiding further exclusions of areas from this process

NGO representatives said that the position in regard to land grabbing, landlessness and prosecution of activists had worsened in 2012. They called on the Government to enact reforms to address these issues in 2013. They therefore put forward the following recommendations to be accepted by the RGC as follows:

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- End forced evictions, and ensure communities are fairly treated in regard to compensation and relocation sites when movement occurs
- Prioritize systematic land registration for poor communities in provinces and cities and expedite granting land ownership
- Ensure due process, proper dialogue, appropriate information and fair negotiation regarding relocation of communities
- Ensure that the moratorium on ELCs is fully adhered to and that no future ELCs are granted. Ensure that the process of reviewing Economic Land Concessions is transparent and carried out as a priority.
- Ensure that existing disputes between ELC concessionaires and local communities are resolved in due time
- Boundary demarcation – ensure that the demarcation of state land and private land, as well as protected areas and community forestry areas are carried out as a priority and that the process is transparent. Make a State Land Map database publicly accessible.
- Ensure that Circular 03, supporting sub-national level initiatives, is supported through openness of authorities in identifying decent housing solutions, and clarify the process surrounding its implementation
- Ensure that Executive Order 01 is implemented to support the poor and vulnerable of Cambodia and that it is not undermining Indigenous Peoples communal land registration
- Free land activist Ms Yorm Bopha, and end obstruction of non-violent activities by communities, such as petitions and requests

- Ensure that information about upcoming investments is disseminated in advance and full environmental and social impact studies are undertaken
- Consult with affected communities before proceedings with developments, while following the concept of Free, Prior, Informed Consent
- Make publicly available information on contracts and agreements, revenues and spending
- Speed up the process of community forestry and protected area recognition
- Adopt and implement National Housing Policy, which has been drafted since 2006.

**For further information, please contact:**

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