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WORKSHOP ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND BUSINESS

26 MARCH 2010

**Remarks by Christophe Peschoux
Representative of the Cambodia Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

Welcome to this workshop on 'Human Rights and Business', co-organised by OHCHR and the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights. This is the first of its kind ever organized in Cambodia, to discuss with private sector representatives the links between human rights and businesses.

Why this workshop today? It is an unusual idea to gather in the same room representatives of private sector, civic organizations, human rights actors and United Nations. Usually, human rights issues are matters for debate between citizens and the State.

If we have invited you to participate in this meeting today, it is because of the central role that you are playing - - as private enterprises - - not only in the development of the economy, but, in the shaping of our societies, the lives of the people, and the resources and environment that supports our life.

No debate today about society, about our life, about our future, can ignore the role of the economy and the private sector. Businesses have become a central actor in almost all societies, which shape and influence these societies in almost every sphere.

This is not new: since human beings have started exchanging goods and services, these exchanges have shaped their lives, brought them in contact with each other, and gradually transformed the world into what is becoming a global society.

Businesses are powerful forces. They are major sources of investment, creativity, creation of wealth and jobs. They are an important engine of economic development; they can contribute to reduce poverty; they can also contribute to strengthen the rule of law.

Citizens have rights - - the right to life, to personal safety, to physical integrity, to education, to health care, to work, to housing, to freedom of opinion, etc. They also have responsibilities: their rights are limited by the rights of others; this is where their responsibility starts.

States also have rights and obligations: they have the responsibility to protect public interest, to protect the law, to ensure a peaceful environment, to arbitrate conflicts in society, and to provide essential services.

States and citizens have defined their mutual relationships, domestically and international law - - this is what law, and international human rights law is about: a set of principles to regulate the relationship between citizens and their governments.

But what about business companies? Do they have rights and responsibilities? What their rights are? What are their responsibilities towards society? I am not going to respond to this, it is up to you today to start reflecting about it.

Everybody knows that private businesses can contribute to create economic growth, collective and individual wealth, progressive labor conditions, reduction of poverty; they can also exploit workers, including children; increase poverty; foment conflicts; plunder resources and threaten the environment. In this sense, they can promote and protect human rights, or conversely, undermine them and create more misery.

In recent years, as a result of globalization, a global governance framework has begun to develop, redefining the roles of the main actors in society, and looking for common principles of coexistence and cooperation. Businesses themselves have actively participated in this search for common guiding principles. There is growing trend among businesses to reflect about their role and responsibility towards society - - at home and abroad - - what is known as corporate social responsibility.

One very interesting initiative is the work the SRSG on Human Rights and Business John Ruggie. Since 2003, he has been requested by the HRC to clarify the obligations of governments to regulate business activities; and what were businesses' responsibilities towards human rights. He has been working closely with businesses, governments and civil society to develop a framework. We will discuss some of them today.

One of the most interesting findings of his research is that there is a growing expectation among people that businesses act in a socially responsible manner, and respect human rights.

So I would like to invite participants today, to reflect together, from our different points of view, on whether private enterprises have a responsibility towards the society they live and operate in? If they have a responsibility, what is it?

Last I would like to add that human rights organizations are not against economic development, nor private businesses. Everybody wishes to enjoy the benefit of economic development. The question is what kind of development? A development that throws millions out of job, threatens the environment, the climate and the very earth which we live on, at the risk of threatening our very survival - - or a development where resources are properly managed, benefits are shared, everyone has the chance to develop his or her own potential, to his benefit and to that of society?

Is the economy at the service of itself, exclusively, or at the service of society, that is, human beings and the planet they live on and off? A last word to feed the discussion: Economy in ancient Greek means putting the house in order. After the recent financial crisis, I think that there is no need to insist on the urgency to put some order into the house.

This workshop is a first occasion in series of discussions with you and other business leaders, NGOs, the Government and the UN - - to contribute to this worldwide search for common principles of living together, since history shows us that we share a community of destiny, that "we all are in the same boat", and that boat is called the Earth.

Thank you.