

UN expert: Civil society is crucial for sustainable development in Cambodia

GENEVA (8 November 2018) – A UN human rights expert urged the Cambodian Government to work more closely with civil society groups, and said the best way for the country to achieve a durable peace and sustainable development was to put human rights at the forefront of policymaking.

“Good governance requires strong and open institutions that function according to human rights principles,” said Rhona Smith, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia at the end of an 11-day visit to the country. “That means access to information, transparency, public participation in decision-making, the accountability of office-bearers and civil servants and access to justice, supported by a free press and a vibrant, free and innovative civil society.”

Smith drew attention to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), noting that in particular that “SDG16, with its focus on strong, effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, on transparency and on access to justice provides a vehicle” to embed human rights principles in the country’s development strategy framework.

While referring to her ongoing concerns in relation to the recent national elections and the shrinking of democratic space in Cambodia, the Special Rapporteur welcomed the Government’s recent efforts to develop mechanisms to enhance public participation in law and policy decisions. She also welcomed that the Minister of Interior repealed the October 2017 instruction which had greatly restricted civil society organisations from conducting their activities, and urged the Government to “ensure the proper implementation of this new instruction at all levels”.

However, she noted that civil society organisations still faced considerable burdens in complying with Cambodia’s restrictive laws. She encouraged the Government “to undertake a review of the applicable legislative and administrative framework, in consultation with civil society organisations and the UN, to ensure that regulations meet their aim without being unduly burdensome, and that they are applied transparently and fairly”.

Smith expressed her concern about lengthy pre-trial detention as well as the length of time taken for trials to take place. She called for the release of Kem Sokha - the leader of the former Cambodia National Rescue Party which was dissolved in November 2017 - from restricted detention, and the swift conclusion of the investigation into his case to ensure his right to a fair trial within a reasonable time or for the charges to be dropped.

Smith noted that steps by the Ministry of Economy and Finance to introduce performance budgeting were encouraging but stressed more efforts were needed, particularly in the judicial sector. “I call on the Ministry of Justice and judicial

institutions to be more transparent in relation to their operations, to take more steps to combat corruption and to strengthen judicial independence and impartiality.”

During her visit, the Special Rapporteur also visited Kampong Chhnang province where people living in floating villages are being relocated to permanent land sites. There was evidence of some good practice, however the Special Rapporteur still urged the Government ‘to improve the ways in which it addresses the complex issue of land rights, through more transparency, fairness and by ensuring a holistic approach to settling land disputes and when considering relocation. Only through this would no one be left behind.”

Smith concluded her visit with a reminder of the central role that respecting human rights plays in achieving sustainable development. “If Cambodia is to continue on its path of sustainable economic growth, it needs Government that reflects the will of the people, institutions that respond to people’s rights, and people with the necessary skills, voice and access to services to participate actively in development and society,” she said. “The Constitution, human rights standards and SDGs provide the means to do so.”

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Professor Rhona Smith (United Kingdom) was appointed as [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia](#) by the UN Human Rights Council in March 2015.

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This year, 2018, is the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN on 10 December 1948. The Universal Declaration – translated into a world record 500 languages – is rooted in the principle that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” It remains relevant to everyone, every day. In honour of the 70th anniversary of this extraordinarily influential document, and to prevent its vital principles from being eroded, we are urging people everywhere to **Stand Up for Human Rights**: www.standup4humanrights.org