

UN expert calls for open political dialogue for peace and sustainable development

GENEVA (9 May 2019) – A UN human rights expert urged Cambodians to change the political culture to one of dialogue with a focus on issues rather than people, as a way to move ahead and to create a solid basis for durable peace, sustainable development and the enjoyment of all human rights.

On her seventh visit to Cambodia, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia, Rhona Smith, continued her review of the general human rights situation and the country's adoption of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Special Rapporteur was encouraged by steps taken since her last visit in November, including the start of a process to amend the Trade Union Law, readiness to consider a review of the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations, the lifting of a requirement on civil society organisations to provide three-days' notice to the authorities prior to undertaking activities, and the holding of the second national Partnership Forum with Civil Society Organizations in January.

"The national Forum provides a means for dialogue between civil society organizations and the Government and I hope that such dialogue can be constructive and build trust," Smith said in a statement at the end of her visit.

However, in the area of political rights, the Special Rapporteur saw few tangible improvements. Smith noted actions by the police and courts against some 80 former members and elected officials of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), which she noted were not conducive to the strengthening of political rights and democratic space.

"A new political culture is needed in Cambodia. One that focuses on the issues of concern to Cambodia and Cambodians rather than on personalities," the Special Rapporteur said. "This culture should be based on respect for open and constructive debate involving multiple voices and the free expression of ideas, including dissenting ideas."

Smith called again for the release of Kem Sokha - the leader of the former Cambodia National Rescue Party which was dissolved in November 2017 - from detention, and the swift conclusion of the investigation or the dropping of the charges.

During her mission, the Special Rapporteur drew attention to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which provide a guide to achieving sustainable

development in ways that respect human rights. She welcomed the recent adoption of the Cambodian localization plan of the SDGs and encouraged ways for it to strengthen human rights.

“A stronger focus on SDG 16 will increase Cambodia’s ambition to achieve access to justice for all, end violence, combat corruption, strengthen the rule of law, ensure participatory decision-making and access to information, protect fundamental freedoms and combat discrimination,” Smith said. “Including these targets can only strengthen Cambodia’s development and would be in line with the Government’s Rectangular Strategy Phase IV.”

The Special Rapporteur also highlighted the importance of leaving no one behind in efforts to implement the Cambodian SDGs. She encouraged the Government to adopt a comprehensive understanding of who might be at risk of being left behind to ensure that development efforts are targeted where they are most needed.

“The poor and near-poor need to be brought from behind. However, within and beyond this category there are many other individuals and groups living in vulnerable situations, including women and children, persons with disabilities, indigenous communities, or people relocated from their land.” Smith hoped that the recent census and the upcoming Demographic Health Survey will provide useful data to identify those most at risk.

Smith also called for inclusive development based on democratic principles and human rights that seek progress and prosperity for all, based on open dialogue and leaving no one behind. She reiterated her commitment to listen to all stakeholders in an impartial manner and support inclusive dialogue as she continues to monitor and advocate for the enjoyment of human rights for all in Cambodia.

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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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