



**Statement of the
Special Representative of the Secretary-General
for human rights in Cambodia,
Professor Peter Leuprecht**

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

57th session

After its deafening silence during the Khmer Rouge era and a period of indifference thereafter, the international community has become, and remains, strongly involved in Cambodia. To accompany this country on its way from an atrocious past to a brighter future, from murderous violence to peace and harmony, should be the main objective of the international community. To progress on this road, Cambodia will have to come to terms with its past. It should be able to rely on the solidarity of the international community in this difficult process. Cambodia's wounded and traumatized society needs the discovery of truth, healing and justice. It also needs to be treated with sympathy, respect and a high degree of sensitivity. It is my firm and strong hope that the Secretary-General will be given a mandate to resume negotiations with the Cambodian Government on the establishment of a Khmer Rouge tribunal and that these negotiations will be conducted in a constructive spirit by both sides and be rapidly brought to a conclusion in line with international standards of justice and human rights.

Cambodia has come a long way over the past decade, but a lot more needs to be done to ensure a life in dignity for all Cambodians. This will only be possible if all their human rights are respected, civil and political as well as economic, social and cultural rights. Cambodia actually provides a telling example of the factual indivisibility of human rights. Whatever human rights issue one addresses, one is confronted with fundamental cross-cutting problems and challenges such as poverty, violence, corruption and lawlessness.

Let me mention five critical areas in which further progress is needed to build a peaceful and democratic society based on the rule of law and respect for human rights.

1. Judicial reform. Without it, it will be difficult or even impossible to put an end to impunity. The law must be enforced with regard to all, whether rich or poor, whether powerful or weak. Mob killings must be stopped and those responsible must be brought to justice. There cannot be a strong and independent judiciary without a strong and independent bar. The dramatic shortage of lawyers must be addressed urgently. Overall progress in the area of judicial reform has been slow, in spite of some positive developments such as the creation of a School for Training Judges and Prosecutors.
2. Land grabbing, landlessness and involuntary relocation heavily affect Cambodia's poor, thus contributing to a further widening of the wealth gap in one of the poorest countries of the world.
3. Trafficking in human beings is flourishing in a context of poor law enforcement and corruption. The problem is by no means limited to Cambodia. It is a cross-border phenomenon in South-East Asia where, according to serious estimates, every year more than 200.000 women and children are 'trafficked'. Never in my life will I forget the sad faces of 6, 7 or 8 years old

girls who had fallen victim to human trafficking and sexual exploitation and who had found refuge in a shelter run by an NGO. Those I met there are only the top of the iceberg; most victims will never be seen again by people other than those who scandalously exploit them.

4. Education is an essential key to Cambodia's future. Equal access should be ensured for all children and young people. In particular, the gender gap must be addressed. The quality of education must be improved. The positive efforts made by the Ministry of Education, UN Agencies, donors and NGOs deserve wholehearted encouragement and support.

5. The first local elections were held in Cambodia last February. General elections are scheduled for 27 July 2003. All those concerned should, on the one hand, build on the positive aspects of the commune council elections and, on the other hand, do everything in their power to prevent the reoccurrence of the negative phenomena by which they were overshadowed, in particular violence and intimidation. State institutions and those representing them, including law enforcement officials, must show proper neutrality. The National Electoral Commission should become a truly independent, neutral and transparent body. Equal access to the media, including radio and television, must be ensured for all political parties.

These are just a few of the many critical human rights issues with which Cambodian society is confronted. Improvement of the overall situation requires a global strategy and a strong political will. The interests of the people must come first and their suffering must be alleviated. The Cambodian Government and Cambodian society, including NGOs which are accomplishing extremely valuable work, should be able to continue to rely on the support and assistance of the international community. Donors should continue and intensify their aid to Cambodia and make sure that their aid really benefits the people and, in the first place, the poorest among them. The Government must understand that aid is a partnership and that donors expect, and are entitled to see, results. The result to which, I am sure, we all want to contribute is peace and harmony which, after a far too long period of terrible upheavals and intense suffering, the peoples of Cambodia deeply deserve.