



Statement by the Special Representative of the United Nations  
Secretary-General for Human Rights in Cambodia  
(30 July 1998)

Phnom Penh - Serious concerns persist over the human rights situation in Cambodia. It is essential that the government tackle these as a matter of priority. It is equally important that the international community retains a firm commitment to human rights in Cambodia both through its words and through practical assistance.

There are several areas in particular where progress is urgently needed:

There is a need to build a system of justice capable of tackling the widespread problem of impunity. Violent and other crimes are still routinely going unchecked. It is essential that the government seriously look into the approximately 100 extra-judicial killings which have occurred since August last year. The UN has brought these to the government's attention in two memoranda and in the reports which it has prepared on violence during the election campaign period. So far, there has been no prosecution in any of these cases. Steps are needed to amend legislation hindering prosecutors and law enforcement authorities from arresting and prosecuting perpetrators of crime: article 51 of the Civil Servants Act should be repealed.

A thorough review of the system of administration of justice, including a clarification and reorganization of the structures of law enforcement, is urgently required. A recent assessment by UN experts of investigations into the March 1997 grenade attack in Phnom Penh and extra-judicial executions since July last year identified a clear need for the powers and authority of officials in the judiciary, the police, and the armed forces to be defined, and for the responsibilities of the controlling ministries to be clearly laid down. Rules and regulations or Acts for the functioning of the police and judiciary must be established and brought into force.

When the next Cambodian Government defines its agenda on human rights, attention should also be paid to other critical issues such as the rights of women and children, and the related problems of domestic violence, prostitution and trafficking, and child labour. The school system is chaotic and corrupt, and special effort is needed to ensure that girls have access to education. As to the participation of women in public life, the low number of female candidates for posts in the National Assembly reflects only too accurately the current position of women in Cambodian society.

The election discussion has left some other important human rights matters unanswered. The experience of past weeks, including the massacre in April of Vietnamese villagers in Kompong Chhnang, has shown that major efforts must be made to overcome hatred and prejudice against ethnic minorities. Political leaders have a moral responsibility to lead the way in showing tolerance and respect for their fellow human beings, regardless of origin. This is an essential part of human rights.

Another unresolved issue relates to freedom of expression and the state approach to the granting of licenses for radio and television stations. It is recommended that the Government set up an impartial commission to propose rules and procedures for a fair distribution of frequencies between private interest groups. The state radio and television should service the whole community and stand independent from political parties.

Finally, I wish to emphasize the importance of non-governmental action for human rights. I am concerned about proposed restrictive legislation on the funding and operations of non-governmental organisations. I urge the government not to take such a course, but to expand and build on its relationships with members of the non-governmental community. Many of these bodies are providing essential help to Cambodia in strengthening and upholding human rights. The participation of many of them in the preparation and observation of the recent election campaign demonstrates clearly their capabilities and potential. It is essential that they continue to be able to work unhindered and with the full blessing of the government.