



Media Statement

NGOs monitoring the rehabilitation of Cambodia's railways are essential to just and inclusive development

September 5th, 2011

Over the last few weeks, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has been taking action against local and international organizations working on human rights and advocacy, particularly those working to monitor the resettlement impacts of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and AusAID-financed Railways Rehabilitation Project. Specifically, the RGC has levelled accusations against four organisations: an international solidarity organization Bridges Across Borders Cambodia (BABC), an umbrella organization, and two local organizations, Sahnmakum Teang Tnaut (STT), and the coalition Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF).

These organizations have come under mounting pressure by the RGC. The Ministry of Interior (MoI) issued a letter of suspension to STT on August 2, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MOFAIC) issued formal warning letters to BABC and Umbrella Organization on August 18. In these warning letters, the MOFAIC states that BABC and Umbrella Organization made “grave accusations ... which is tantamount to an attempt to discredit Royal Government of Cambodia and incite the public against its administration.” This accusation refers to an October 2010 letter sent by the four NGOs to ADB President Mr. Haruhiko Kuroda, in which NGOs highlighted problems in the railways project, as well as drew attention to the deaths of two children at the Battambang resettlement site and the site's lack of basic services at the time of relocation.

In light of these events, we wish to clarify the following points:

When the families were relocated to the Battambang site, neither potable clean water nor affordable electricity was available, as required under the minimum resettlement standards in ADB's Involuntary Resettlement Policy. Shortly after relocation, the community sought out a nearby pond to access water and two children, ages 8 and 13, regrettably drowned in this pond. The circumstances surrounding the event were documented by BABC at the time and were publicly released in a short documentary. A story broadcasted by Australian Broadcasting Corporation news in May 2011 further documented the circumstances surrounding the families' relocation.

Both documentaries remain open to the public at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtFPqcVNIzc&feature=player_embedded and
<http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2011/s3216781.htm>, respectively.

The high-quality research done by these organisations has documented a number of potential safeguard violations, which they have been working to rectify in cooperation with the ADB and AusAID. This work has been and continues to be vital in ensuring that affected families receive adequate resettlement, compensation, and livelihood support that leaves them no worse off than they were before the project, as

prescribed by the ADB Involuntary Resettlement Policy. As noted in an August 18 public statement, the ADB also *'believes the NGOs and civil society play an important role in the successful implementation of development projects, and hopes that NGOs will be allowed to continue their work on the railway project.'*

STT, BABC, HRTF and umbrella organization have been working with the ADB and AusAID towards resolving a number of issues related to the project in order to ensure its successful implementation, while trying to increase the well-being of all Cambodian people affected by the project and fulfilling their right to an adequate standard of living. The affected people living along the railway tracks are increasingly scared and fear that without the work of the NGOs monitoring the project, safeguard violations will remain unaddressed. As such, the suspension of STT and the public warnings to BABC and umbrella organization are likely to be detrimental to the project itself.

We wish to clarify that we are not against the Railways project. We support all development projects that reduce poverty and fulfil the human rights of the Cambodian people, including the right to an adequate standard of living.

We appeal to the Royal Government of Cambodia, ADB, and AusAID to fully implement their projects and policies, including the ADB Involuntary Resettlement Policy, and we will gladly provide any assistance we can towards achieving this goal.

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