

## **Cambodia Moves Toward Openness**

After Jailing Critics, Premier Relents and Vows Reforms; Many Remain Cautious

*The Washington Post*

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March 10, 2006

SAMRONG DISTRICT, Cambodia -- Kem Sokha, president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, addressed a throng of 1,000 villagers, nuns and monks who had gathered recently at an ancient Hindu temple here to cheer his release from jail.

Many of them had put their thumbprints on a petition seeking his freedom. He thanked them, but he urged vigilance. "The situation is not that different from before," he said, the yellow ribbon on his safari suit symbolizing freedom of expression. "Don't be too happy."

Kem Sokha was among the activists and opposition politicians who have been detained during the past year and then released in recent weeks as the government of Prime Minister Hun Sen appeared to step back from its campaign to silence critics.

"The last six to eight weeks have been remarkable," U.S. Ambassador Joseph Mussomeli said in an interview. "There's still a lot to be done and the institutions need enormous strengthening, but the goodwill and the atmosphere is right for developing those institutions."

Hun Sen's government was rewarded last week when foreign donors meeting in Phnom Penh, the capital, pledged to give Cambodia at least \$600 million in aid this year, a 20 percent increase over last year. They said they were encouraged by economic progress and Hun Sen's conciliatory moves toward the political opposition, although they still were concerned about corruption.

Human rights groups contend that the boost in aid without stiff conditions sends the wrong signal to a government they say continues to harass activists and threatens journalists with prison even as it releases some imprisoned people. They say the government has failed to keep pledges to end illegal logging and prevent illegal land sales to officials and groups linked to the ruling party, prime issues among the rural poor who make up 80 percent of Cambodia's population.

"This is a decade-old pattern: assurances by the government right before donor meetings, followed by a return to the old ways afterward," said Basil Fernando, executive director of the Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission.

Hun Sen, who has been the sole prime minister since 1998 and will be up for reelection in 2008, has renewed a promise that a long-delayed anti-corruption law would pass soon. He also has pledged to set up a land dispute resolution committee.

"If Hun Sen fails, I am not sure who can have more success than Hun Sen," he told the meeting of donors -- representatives of 12 countries and institutions such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the European Commission. He said he had the power to remove corrupt governors and police chiefs and send them to court.

Over the past year, however, he has used that power to silence critics. The government stripped opposition leader Sam Rainsy and two colleagues of parliamentary immunity. Sam Rainsy fled into exile and was sentenced to 18 months in prison in absentia for criminal defamation. One of his colleagues was accused of setting up an illegal army and sentenced to seven years. A radio journalist and a union leader were jailed on charges of defaming Hun Sen. Kem Sokha and a fellow human rights activist were jailed on defamation charges. A few days later, Kem Sokha's deputy was arrested and faces a similar charge.

The U.N. human rights envoy for Cambodia said the country was on the brink of totalitarianism. Western editorials decried it as a dictatorship. Human Rights Watch compared it to Burma, which is ruled by a military junta.

Then Hun Sen appeared to reverse course. On Jan. 10, a human rights activist was released on bail. A week later, Kem Sokha and three others were freed. In February, Sam Rainsy's colleague was released. A few days later, with a pardon deal in hand, Sam Rainsy returned to Cambodia. On Valentine's Day, Hun Sen called for the decriminalization of defamation. He has begun discussing with Sam Rainsy what the opposition figure has said are "solutions to national issues."

"The prime minister's moves to release people who never should have been arrested in the first place should not be seen as meaningful progress," said Sidiki Kaba, president of the Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights.

In public forums around the country -- organized by the U.S.-funded Cambodian Center for Human Rights -- villagers have been airing concerns about corrupt officials, abuses of power and inadequate services.

At a forum last month in Kampong Chhnang province, north of the capital, speaker after speaker complained about land confiscated by local officials or groups backed by local officials belonging to Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party.

Kong Nem, 45, a widow whose left foot was blown off by a land mine in 1986, spoke of how excavators appeared one day in 2004 and cleared a 300-acre field that her village had farmed for years. The village chief and his Cambodian People's Party cronies had sold the tract to a company for an acacia tree farm, she said.

The villagers took the matter to the provincial court, which suggested they be paid compensation. "We don't want money," she told the forum audience, nearly shouting. "We just want our land."

Her village, a three-hour truck ride from the capital, is a collection of thatched huts with no electricity or running water. Seventy families once grew watermelons, beans, cauliflower and potatoes in the field. Now, she said, they face hunger.

In desperation, about 100 villagers piled into two trucks and headed to the capital last July, Kong Nem said. They camped in front of the National Assembly. Two days later, the police ordered them to leave. When they refused, the police wielded electric batons, she said.

"They shocked us," she recalled. "We lost consciousness. They threw us in the truck. It was so unjust."

Outside Sam Rainsy's party headquarters, dozens of villagers from several provinces have camped for days, seeking help in resolving land conflicts. They have come in threes and fours, hiding their mats and cooking pots in bags so the police would not arrest them on suspicion of plotting a protest.

Tith Sophat, 43, a rice farmer, arrived from faraway Battambang province to protest the December razing of 89 villagers' homes and fields by the military. "The soldiers pointed a gun at me," he said. "They said, 'If you protest, you will die.' The powerful people just want to get the land to sell to business people."

Tith Sophat said he was staying until he had a letter from Hun Sen saying the land was theirs. "If not," he said, "I will not return."