

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE 0001 HRS GMT 23 OCTOBER 1997**CAMBODIA: ESCAPING THE KILLING FIELDS?**

Despite immense international efforts to rebuild Cambodian society, impunity for government officials who commit human rights violations remains a cancer at the heart of national life, Amnesty International said today.

Since the 5 July 1997 coup, dozens of people have been unlawfully killed, usually because of their political affiliations, political detainees have been tortured and forced to sign false confessions, and thousands of people have fled for their lives into exile, yet no-one has been called to account.

“Once more the spectre of political killings stalks Cambodia, and until the perpetrators of human rights violations really believe that they will be punished for their actions, Cambodia will never truly escape its past as the country of killing fields,” said Demelza Stubbings, Amnesty International’s Researcher on Cambodia, who has just returned from the country.

“The judicial system in Cambodia remains weak and corrupt, and the Royal Government has not demonstrated that it has any political will to implement reforms, uphold the rule of law or investigate and bring to trial those accused of human rights abuses.”

In a report issued today, Amnesty International documents the recent political and human rights developments, and examines the Royal Government’s record on human rights. At least 40 people have apparently been executed since 5 July. Although the government claims that they died during the course of armed conflict, Amnesty International believes that they were unlawfully killed.

“Three headless corpses found floating in a river, their hands tied behind their back, and with bullet wounds to the abdomen. The body of a General loyal to ousted Prince Ranariddh found in a grave with his legs bound and his hands cut off. These are not people killed in the normal course of armed conflict,” said Ms Stubbings, who was recently granted a royal award by Cambodia’s King Norodom Sihanouk for Amnesty International’s work in support of human rights in Cambodia.

Elections are scheduled to take place in Cambodia in 1998. Unless there is a dramatic improvement in the human rights situation, the security of candidates, activists and voters cannot be guaranteed.

“While the victims wait for justice, Cambodia’s leaders are squabbling over the short-term spoils of power, at the expense of the long-term interests of Cambodia’s people,” Ms Stubbings said. “It is up to all those governments with a stake in Cambodia to put pressure on the authorities to break the cycle of violence.”

The international community has invested heavily in Cambodia, both politically and financially and therefore has a position of special leverage as well as a special responsibility.

Governments involved in this process should send a clear and unequivocal signal to the Cambodian authorities about their human rights record.

The Cambodian authorities should be pressured to investigate all alleged cases of human rights violations in the country, both before and after the 5 July 1997. The Royal Government should also give an unequivocal guarantee that intimidation and harassment of political opponents, journalists, editors and human rights workers will not be tolerated. Efforts which began in June 1997 to bring to justice all those implicated in gross human rights violations while the Khmer Rouge were in power in Cambodia in the 1970s should continue.

“For too long, those who have committed human rights abuses in Cambodia have been able to do so without fear of prosecution. This has been true for everyone from Khmer Rouge leaders of the 1970s to Royal Government soldiers in the 1990s. For the sake of Cambodia’s people, it’s time to put a stop to this impunity,” said Ms Stubbings.

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