

Opening Remarks by H.E. KEO Sothie
Vice-President of the Cambodian Human Rights Committee (CHRC)
Head of Cambodian Delegation

**in Consideration of the First National Report of Cambodia submitted to the Convention for
the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance**
the 26th Session of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances
19 – 20 February 2024,
Geneva, Switzerland



- Mister Chair,
- Distinguished Members of the Committee of Enforced Disappearances,
- Excellencies,
- Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very good afternoon and warmest greetings to you. On behalf of the Cambodian delegations, I would like to begin by first expressing our appreciation to the Chair and other members of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances for the opportunity to convene here to consider the first national report of Cambodia submitted to the Committee on Enforced Disappearances on October 15, 2021. On behalf of the Cambodian Delegation, we are honoured to be before you to present and discuss Cambodia’s report, and to share further findings and clarification as well as highlight our constant endeavours that we have made towards the implementation of the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

We thank you for graciously putting your efforts to assist Cambodia in ensuring the physical convening of this meeting. The Royal Government of Cambodia has every faith that the constructive dialogues would yield fruitful results in providing substantial contribution to Cambodia’s ongoing efforts to further improve the implementation of the Convention. Cambodia remains steadfast in collaborating with every member of the Committee to take stock of helpful suggestions, observations and recommendations received during this session.

A brief introduction of the key members of our delegation, if you indulge me. Our inter-ministerial delegation convening today includes:

His Excellency Neak Seakirin, Secretary of State from the Ministry of Justice

His Excellency Y Sok Khy, Deputy General Commissioner of the National Police from the Ministry of Interior.

From the Cambodian Human Rights Committee (CHRC) we have:

Her Excellency Long Sonita, Vice-President of CHRC

His Excellency Pa Ponnarada, Member of CHRC.

And our colleague Excellency Nuon Rithyroath from the Permanent Mission of Cambodia to the United Nations Office and Other International Organization at Geneva is also present here with us today.

Mr. Chair, Distinguished Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since this is Cambodia's first appearance before this Committee, allow me to provide brief history of Cambodia as an opportunity to tell the world who we are; and I believe that this will provide important context for the discussions to come. Cambodia is a small country with a big heart—with people who are full of kindness. Personally, I believe that we are kind because we as a people understand suffering well.

Cambodia has a tragic history. It underwent colonialism, genocide, and civil war. During the Khmer Rouge regime, state institutions that were the bedrock of Cambodian society, national infrastructure, and intellectual resources were completely obliterated. Nearly two million Cambodians died during the Khmer Rouge regime. While many have survived, they traumatically live with the memories of the regime and their lost loved ones, and others are left handicapped, widowed, or orphaned. The pervasive effects of wars continue to deeply scar Cambodia in present days. I personally do not know any Cambodian who did not lose a loved one to the Khmer Rouge.

Nevertheless, Cambodians are also a resilient people. We have resiliently made significant strides to overcome these devastating challenges. In such a short span of time Cambodia has grown into a country with peace, stability, dynamic growth, and economic, social, and cultural development. One of Cambodia's first step towards peace and reconciliation as a post-conflict country was to seek justice and punish the most senior and responsible leaders of the Khmer Rouge. To put this into context of how significant of an achievement this is, only a few international criminal convictions have been against heads of states. Through the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), NUON Chea and KHIEU Samphan, who are among the highest levels of Khmer Rouge leaders were convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. No other ASEAN Member States have established an internationalized or a hybrid tribunal like the ECCC to address any ongoing or past atrocities. Cambodia has chosen not to cower, forget, or ignore past crimes that were committed, but face head on with its genocidal past. In addition to adherence to international criminal law jurisprudence, Cambodia also made an immense contribution to both global and domestic efforts to combat impunity for mass atrocity crimes. It has strengthened respect for the rule

of law in Cambodia and helped heal wounds of the past, allowing the people of this country to look to the future.

As a result of its history, sustainable peace for continued development is Cambodia's utmost priority. The rapid and stable development of Cambodia should not be taken for granted, especially when considering the scale of failed states and the current ongoing conflicts across the world. To have gone through a genocidal regime with almost a quarter of its population lost, civil war for the next 14 years, and then emerge as a functional country where the general Cambodian population is able to reconcile and thrive is no small feat.

With enduring peace and stability resulting especially from the implementation of Samdech Techo Hun Sen's Win-Win Policy, Cambodia continues to make notable progress on every front. Over the past two decades, poverty fell steadily, at an average annual rate of 1.6 percent. Cambodia's economy grew by more than 7 percent a year until COVID-19 broke out. Cambodia was hailed as one of the most successful countries in controlling the pandemic and recovering from its impact. Economic growth returned to 5.2 percent in 2022 and is projected to continue growing at 5.6 percent in 2023. Millions of people have been lifted out of poverty, with decent livelihoods, education, welfare, and significantly increased life expectancy rising from 59 years in 1998 to 76.8 years in 2019. The country is steadily transitioning from Least Developed to Developing Country status by 2027.

Cambodia will also focus on expanding healthcare services to cover 9 million beneficiaries; providing vocational training to 1.5 million youths living in poor household; establishing internet services to all communes, schools, and health centers by 2024; and laying out electricity connection grids to all communes before 2030.

This is all thanks to sound government policies led by the former prime minister, Samdech Techo Hun Sen and the current prime minister, Samdech Moha Bovor Thepidey Hun Manet and our ability to maintain peace, stability, high economic growth, equitable distribution of benefits, and good cooperation with all stakeholders.

More than 70 percent of Cambodia's sustainable development goals indicators and sub-indicators are well on track. Cambodia highly values and adheres to its engagement with the international community as well as its international commitments. It sees itself proudly as a member of the international community with respect for the rule of law. Because it is the rule of law that provides, especially for smaller countries, the best protection and guarantee of peace and stability in this dynamic and complex world.

Cambodia has ratified many international human rights instruments to demonstrate our commitment to the rule of law and protection and promotion of human rights. Eight out of the nine core human rights treaties have been ratified and accepted by Cambodia. Cambodia has been actively involved and participated in all United Nations human rights mechanisms, along with other treaty bodies. To illustrate, since 1993, Cambodia has been the only country in the ASEAN region that has welcomed the presence of the Special Rapporteur and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to monitor the human rights situation in Cambodia and has extended their mandates until the present time. Moreover, Cambodia has never denied any request for a country visit from the Special Rapporteur or any other dialogue partners. Cambodia remains devoted in upholding human rights protection and promotion on the national, regional, and global levels.

The individual and collective rights of all citizens living on Cambodian territories are protected by the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia as stated in Article 31 that, “the Kingdom of Cambodia shall recognize and respect human rights as stipulated in the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human rights, the covenants and conventions related to human rights, women’s and children’s rights. Cambodia’s Constitution is among the few if not the only Constitution that explicitly enshrines the UN Charter and human rights instruments. Every Khmer citizen shall be equal before the law, enjoying the same rights, and freedom and fulfilling the same obligations regardless of race, color, sex, language, religious belief, political tendency, birth origin, social status, wealth or other status.”

Further on the topic of human rights, the Working Group of the Cambodian Human Rights Committee has finalised the Draft Law on the Organisation and Functioning of the National Human Rights Institution based on international standards, receiving technical cooperation from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Cambodia (OHCHR) and the Asia-Pacific Forum on National Human Rights Institutions (APF). The Draft Law was submitted to the general public for comments, and a total of 32 national, sub-national, regional and legislative consultations were conducted. This Draft Law was sent to the Council of Jurists of the Office of the Council of Ministers on 19 September 2023, for their review.

Mr. Chair, Distinguished Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Enforced disappearance is a grave human rights violation. Cambodia recognizes the serious human rights infringement nature of enforce disappearance, the necessity in punishing perpetrators, and the measures required to prevent any recurrence of this heinous crime. The Royal Government of Cambodia has taken concrete steps in reiterating its commitment by ratifying the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance on 27 June 2013

becoming the only country in Southeast Asia to ratify the convention and is amongst the few in the Asia Pacific Region that have done so.

After ratifying the Convention, Cambodia has collaborated with the Committee and produced the first national report that was later submitted before the Committee on October 15, 2021, along with the responses to the List of Issues dated December 27, 2023.

In Cambodia, since the ratification of the Convention no one is under the circumstances of enforced disappearance within the definition of Article 2 of the Convention. And without exception, under no circumstances may war situations or threats of war, internal political instability or public emergencies be used as justification for enforced disappearance. Cambodians right to life, liberty, and security is explicitly enshrined in its Constitution.

Mr. Chair, Distinguished Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Cambodia has adopted a number of legal, judicial, and administrative measures, as well as various policies so as to ensure timely, effective, and comprehensive responses to any enforced disappearance-related issues. Cambodia maintains its position to fulfil obligations stipulated in the Convention, with the aim to protect all persons from enforced disappearance and promote its protection internationally.

Cambodia has taken concrete steps in realizing the sacred aspirations of the people by transforming itself from a killing field, from a battlefield of chronic warfare, from national disintegration and territorial division, into a country of peace, unity, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and socio-economic development.

These hard-earned achievements have only been possible because of the unified efforts from the Royal Government, ministries, state institutions, and authorities at all levels, national stakeholders, continuous support and assistance from the international community, and especially the Cambodian people themselves.

Mr. Chair, Distinguished Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I draw to a close, I would like to conclude my remarks by reiterating the significance of the Convention. We are certain that the dialogue's results will direct us in advancing our efforts to enhance the Royal Government's implementation of the Convention. We look forward to providing answers to your questions with sincerity and receiving constructive inputs and reflection for implementation, in the spirit of preventing, combating, and eliminating enforced disappearance.

Thank you.
