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Address of Professor Vitit Muntarbhorn, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Cambodia, to the UN Human Rights Council

Geneva, Switzerland

3 October 2025

Distinguished Members of the Council:

Thank you warmly for your kind attention and support. In my *pro bono* and independent capacity as Special Rapporteur under the UN umbrella, it is an honor to present to you my fifth Report titled "*Between a Quandary and a Quagmire: Natural Resources and Human Rights in Cambodia*".

The report covers the situation from the middle of 2024 till June 2025. Before delving into the contents of the report, a couple of key developments during the past four months - since June 2025 - deserve to be well noted.

First, a border conflict arose, during the period, along the country's western frontier. Fortunately, at the end of July 2025, a ceasefire agreement was reached between the parties concerned, and I welcome the positive development. Effective implementation of that agreement, anchored on shared wisdom, discourse and humanitarian practices, is essential, together with the de-escalation of tensions and peaceful settlement of disputes under International Law.

Civilians affected by the situation should be assisted consistently in keeping with human rights standards, and measures to curb misinformation and disinformation need to be maximized. At the field level nearby, there is the presence of OHCHR and other agencies which can offer a helping hand.

Second, in September 2025, Cambodia witnessed the passage of an amendment to the Law on Nationality, enabling the national authorities to revoke the birth citizenship of Cambodians found guilty of colluding with foreign powers to undermine the country. The alarm has been sounded by civil society and other stakeholders that this amendment is an intimidating instrument to constrain dissident voices internally and externally. The preferred approach is thus to refrain from applying this law and to orient towards its revocation.

This leads appropriately to the findings of the most recent report on the human rights situation in Cambodia. A constructive feature is that the national authorities are committed to multilateralism, even in these convulsive times.

Yet, there is the quandary that the national system remains in the hands of the established elite, in particular since 2017, when the main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), was disbanded by court order under dubious circumstances. The current rulers are closely aligned with the political party that won the largest shares of votes in various rigged elections, and there has been a monopolistic transfer of power from one generation to the next – of the same kith and kin, personifying a quasi-One-Party State.

The situation is aggravated by the following elements.

First, in 2023 and 2024, three elections were held at different levels in Cambodia. There were elections for the National Assembly in July 2023, senatorial elections in February 2024 and elections at the capital, provincial, municipal, district and town (khan) level in May 2024. All were distorted in favour of the ruling elite, and those elections were neither free nor fair.

Second, political actors continue to be detained, and there have been new arrests, detentions and prosecutions of opposition members. In May 2024, for example, the head of the Nation Power Party was arrested and detained for advocating for more space for the opposition. In July 2024, the president of the Candlelight Party, the successor to the CNRP, was found guilty of criticizing the authorities for their negative human rights record and was fined just under $1.5 million.

Third, various civil society actors, such as environmental/human rights defenders, were harassed, arrested, detained and sentenced to imprisonment during the reporting period. Judicialized lawfare casts a wide shadow over those perceived to be dissidents, with the justice system being used to apply laws and policies to sanction decisions from the top. An annex at the end of my most recent report provides a non-exhaustive list of those who have been intimidated by officialdom since 2023.

Fourth, there were multiple cases of transnational repression during the reporting period. This phenomenon covers acts conducted or directed by a State, or its proxy, to harass, silence or punish dissent, criticism or human rights advocacy towards it, expressed from outside its territory.

Fifth, there were many cases of online fraud, scams and related trafficking in persons during the reporting period. While the country has cooperated more actively with other countries to counter the criminal elements involved, the situation remains serious, with a “clamp-down” in one place resulting in a “pop-up” in another place.

Turning now to the issue of natural resources, the country is not short of laws and policies on this front.

In practice, there is a quagmire of potholes.

In addition to existing land and forestry laws, a new environmental code came into effect in 2023. It puts a vast amount of power in the hands of one Ministry, and an ongoing challenge is to avoid a siloed approach and ensure cross-ministerial cooperation. The issue of local stakeholders demands a participatory response to ensure a more democratic process of resource management, conservation and benefit-sharing, rather than unwittingly placing them in the hands of politically linked tycoons.

On land-related issues, there are five key areas of concern: economic land concessions, land giveaways to the business sector, social land concessions, the Angkor Wat issue, and various specific land and environmental protection projects. Interconnected challenges include forced evictions, land tenure and dispossession, respect for the principle of free, prior and informed consent and related remedies, and for Indigenous Peoples and their rights, (predatory) microfinance and debt, and reprisals against stakeholders.

On water-related issues, there are at least five key concerns; namely, clean water and sanitation, dams on the Mekong River, the Funan Techo Canal, Tonle Sap Lake, and coastal issues, including community fisheries. On air-related issues, five elements are particularly challenging: transnational haze, air quality, natural disaster preparation, climate change, and carbon credit exchange and offset. There are recurrent issues of negative impact due to lack of transparent impact assessment, exploitative vested interests, and inadequate inclusion of local stakeholders in the development process. There is also a need for business sector cooperation integrating human rights due diligence into their activities.

Lessons from those life elements call for not only detailed plans and laws on natural resources, but also the space for political liberalization, action against strategic lawsuits constraining public participation, localized stakeholdership, responsiveness from the Government and related businesses, and people-led checks and balances against abuse of power.

Interlinked with the above, the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment espoused by the UN is far from being implemented nationally and locally, whether from the procedural, substantive or remedial angles, while an array of other rights continue to be jeopardized by the stultifying political system.

My fifth Report identifies preferred steps addressed to key target groups. For instance, the national authorities are urged to apply the Cambodian Human Rights Action Agenda formulated by this Special Rapporteur a while ago, including to drop charges against and release political dissidents and environmental/human right defenders, and liberalize the civic and political space. The government should work with the business sector to implement the UN's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. It should engage with all stakeholders to implement the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

The international community is invited to support rights-based conservation and provide technical and other assistance and funding to promote Indigenous-led conservation and land

governance in Cambodia. It should continue to monitor human rights abuses, calling for investigations into key violations, and consistently assess compliance by Cambodia with its international human rights obligations.

There is also a need to support access to funding for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), facilitate diversification of funding sources, and build NGO financial capacity and know-how for income generation, sustainable operational finance, and resource pooling.

Meanwhile, civil society is encouraged to monitor and advocate against the destruction of civic and political space, and the ubiquitous persecution of environmental/human rights defenders, other dissenting voices, and their supporters.

In sum, the kaleidoscope of the country is colored by the call for peace, human rights, democracy, sustainable development and environmental protection, together, not only materially but also non-materially.

In that pursuit, portentously, credible change can only take place through the sharing of power and resources equitably, inclusively and transformatively.

Thank You.