

REMARKS BY USAID MISSION DIRECTOR, ERIN SOTO, CCHR PUBLIC FORUM Prey Thnong Village, Kampot Province

Prey Thnong Village, Kampot
Province, Cambodia
21st September, 2007



*Erin Soto, USAID Mission Director
dialogued with Muslim community in
Kampot province during CCHR's Public
Forum in a Mosque.*

On behalf of USAID, I would like to welcome all of you to today's Public Forum. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you here today.

USAID's support to development in Cambodia is based on a broad range of programs designed to benefit all Cambodians, such as human rights, rule of law, local governance and decentralization, anti-corruption, natural resource management, private sector development, health and education, and combating trafficking in persons.

What is the objective of a public forum? A public forum creates the opportunity for citizens of all political tendencies to speak freely about issues of public concern. It provides people a chance to voice their opinion about issues relevant to the community as a whole.

By utilizing this opportunity to come together and speak freely and openly, you, as community members, are exercising your rights – your right to assemble, your right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press and media. These are rights given to you in your constitution in article 41.

More importantly, these rights are key to making a democracy function effectively for all citizens. Without these rights, citizens don't feel safe to express concerns, raise issues or offer ideas to solve problems.

If government officials don't have input from the citizens, if they don't understand the problems, then it is very difficult for them to be responsive to the needs of the citizens. If government leaders don't respond to citizens' needs, citizens can give their vote to someone else. This is how democracies function.

The government and political leaders need your input to hear your issues so they may do their job. So, not only is it your right to voice your opinions and issues today, your democracy and your government depends on you to do so.

And in return, individuals must be responsible citizens of a democratic society. This means participating in the democratic process, like speaking today, following the laws, paying taxes, meeting peacefully, respecting the rights of others, voting and so forth. Democracy is something that is created by and depends on all individual in a country.

I realize that many of you here today are concerned about land issues. This is a major issue in Cambodia at the moment. It impacts on people's rights and their ability to be productive. It is something that must be addressed fairly and peacefully – in a way that is conducive to a democratic society. Events like this public forum are an opportunity to appropriately address some of these concerns. Use this forum to help the government understand your concerns and how important it is to you and your family.

Again, let me commend CCHR for its positive role in promoting these values in Cambodia. On behalf of USAID we are proud to be associated with this effort. Indeed, from our standpoint, a vibrant civil society, one in which multiple voices are heard, is vital in shaping the political and economic development of any society and country. These fora provide Cambodian citizens practical opportunities to speak publicly in a peaceful setting to voice concerns, discuss disagreements and participate in the building of a peaceful, stable and prosperous Cambodia.

We urge the officials of Cambodia, both elected and appointed, to take into account the issues raised here today and to conduct further investigations or fact finding, particularly with regard to the land cases. As representatives of the people, your officials have a responsibility to represent and address their concerns.

Finally, thank you again for inviting me to speak today. Thank you to CCHR for their sustained effort and commitment. It is my hope that everyone here today will reap the benefits of contributing to and living in a vibrant and healthy democratic Cambodia.