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### Candidate Debates Engage Millions in Democratic Process

Banteay Meanchey Province, Cambodia

July 23, 2008



*Thousands of people attended the debate featuring candidates from the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), Human Rights Party (HRP), Cambodian People Party (CPP) and Khmer Democratic Party (KDP) in Banteay Meanchey Province.*

Hundreds of Cambodians gathered in Banteay Meanchey Province on July 23 for the final candidate debate in a series of 22 held throughout the country over the last few weeks. The USAID-sponsored events were a resounding success, with 22,000 Cambodians attending and millions more following on television and radio.

In addition to giving Cambodians the chance to ask the candidates questions about issues affecting their everyday lives, the debates in provinces like Banteay Meanchey took the candidates outside of Phnom Penh and brought them to rural areas, where 80 percent of the country's population lives. Audience members in Banteay Meanchey listened

as the candidates addressed questions about the price of gasoline, reducing poverty and foreign policy.

"I've never seen anything like this," said Bon Pros, a 35-year-old farmer who attended the debate in Banteay Meanchey. "This gives normal people like me the chance to ask politicians about the issues that are important to me."

Priem Sum An, a 52-year-old food vendor from Sorya Village in Banteay Meanchey, said the debates reinforced the idea that all Cambodians have equal rights, no matter where they are from or how much money they make. "I'm very happy to vote now," she said. "The debate reminded me that I have the right to vote for who I think should lead the country. I have the right to hear information about the candidates and make a decision without any pressure."

Many of the audience members were first-time voters, including Sieh Broat, a 22-year-old farmer from Rasmey Sam Makey village in Banteay Meanchey. She attended the event to learn more about the election process and to make a final decision on how to vote. "Hearing the candidates talk about their platforms helped me decide," she said.

The debate series was the first of its kind to be aired on government-owned TV, carrying the program to every province in the country and laying the foundation for possible future coverage of policy issues on national TV. USAID has supported candidate debates in Cambodia since 2002. The National Democratic Institute implemented the program.