

## **Civil Society Organizations Condemn Government's Arbitrary Suspension of Local NGO "We Are All STT"**

We, representatives of the undersigned members of civil society, support national development that is equitable, inclusive, and sustainable. We believe national development should contribute not only to the growth of commerce and industry but also to the welfare of the wider population. Civil society actors, both local and foreign, play a vital role in this development through monitoring, community development, poverty alleviation, humanitarianism, research, and advocacy. In promoting equitable development and good governance, we also have a right and a responsibility to speak out when development projects have harmful effects.

Over the past two decades, a vibrant civil society sector has developed in Cambodia. The future of that sector is dependent on guaranteed rights to freedom of expression and association as articulated in Cambodia's Constitution, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Today, we see the future of Cambodian democracy at a crossroads. The third draft of the Law on Associations and NGOs is currently at the Council of Ministers and may be on the verge of passage. Unfortunately, even before the restrictive law has been enacted, Cambodian society has been offered a preview into the future of government control over civil society organizations and associations under this law.

On August 2, the Ministry of Interior issued a letter to local NGO Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT) to "suspend [its] activities" until Dec. 31, 2011, a period of five months. STT works with urban poor communities regarding land and housing rights. The organization is also a well-respected member of several civil society networks.

The letter offers no legal basis for the suspension. It simply accuses STT of failing to modify its leadership structure and making a revision to its statutes "according to the instruction of a specialized department." The letter offers no further explanation. To our knowledge, however, the real reason for suspending STT is the organization's legitimate work among urban poor communities.

We are not aware of any legal provision authorizing such a suspension. The lengthy five month time period also appears entirely arbitrary. Efforts to seek clarification from the Ministry of Interior have been met with silence.

We condemn the suspension of STT in the strongest possible terms. The suspension of STT is completely arbitrary and a violation of the constitutional right to freedom of expression and association, and an assault on human rights defenders. We demand its immediate reversal. We regard this act to silence STT as an act of oppression against us all. The use of a vague administrative technicality to suspend an organization is an alarmingly clear sign of how the Cambodian government intends to use the NGO Law to curb the activities of all associations and NGOs that advocate for the rights of marginalized groups within Cambodian society.

STT's work with some of Cambodia's most marginalized communities should be applauded, not silenced. The independent, quantitative research on the impacts of development projects that STT provides should be regarded as helpful in guiding both current and future development projects to better serve the Cambodian people. We urge all concerned parties

to read STT's most recent report, available on the organization's website, and determine for themselves the value of STT's work.

The report is available at:

[http://teangnaut.org/PDF/Rehabilitation%20of%20Cambodias%20Railways\\_STT%20July%202011.pdf](http://teangnaut.org/PDF/Rehabilitation%20of%20Cambodias%20Railways_STT%20July%202011.pdf)

**Endorsed by the following civil society groups:**

1. Bridges Across Borders Cambodia (BABC)
2. Building Community Voices (BCV)
3. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
4. Cambodian Food and Service Workers Federation (CFSWF)
5. Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC)
6. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
7. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
8. Cambodia Women's Crisis Center (CWCC)
9. Center on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE)
10. Christian Aid (CA)
11. Civic Alliance for Social Accountability in Cambodia (CASA)
12. Civil Servant Independent Association (CICA)
13. Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL)
14. Community Legal Education Center (CLEC)
15. Community Peacebuilding Network (CPN)
16. Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC)
17. Danchurch Aid (DCA)
18. Development and Partnership in Action (DPA)
19. Diakonia
20. Forum Syd (FS)
21. Gender And Development For Cambodia (GADC)
22. Heinrich Boell Stiftung (HBS)
23. Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF)
24. Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
25. LICADHO Canada (LC)
26. NGO Coalition to Address Trafficking & Sexual Exploitation of Children in Cambodia (COSECAM)
27. NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child (NGOCRC)
28. NGO Education Partnership (NEP)
29. Norwegian People's Aid (NPA)
30. OXFAM
31. People's Action for Change (PAC)
32. SILAKA
33. Social Action for Change (SAC)
34. Star Kampuchea (SK)
35. The Messenger Band (MB)
36. Trocaire
37. Volunteer for Sustainable Development (VSD)
38. Women for Prosperity (WFP)
39. Women's Media Center of Cambodia (WMC)
40. Worker Rights Consortium (WRC)