

CAMBODIA, CHAIRMAN of ASEAN-2012

Opportunity to Build a Better Future

by Youk Chhang

I would like to welcome our many guests to Cambodia, who have come from throughout the region for official ASEAN meetings and engagement between ASEAN representatives and civil society.

As Cambodians, we are proud to host ASEAN in 2012. Our history has had dark chapters, when we were cut off from much of the world and the surrounding region. It is ironic that the country of Angkor Wat—one of the most magnificent sites in Southeast Asia—was the last to join ASEAN just 13 years ago.

When we Cambodians look back, we see a painful past, but when we look forward, we see great opportunities to grow and to build bridges with our ASEAN partners. We see an obligation to help Cambodians remember, heal, and build a brighter future after the Khmer Rouge. We also see an obligation to share our experiences with our Southeast Asian friends to build a brighter regional future together.

Overcoming the Khmer Rouge legacy is about ensuring the right to life. The Khmer Rouge took from us our most basic necessities—love, livelihoods, family, and faith. We have to work to restore and protect those basic rights and freedoms across the ASEAN region. Here in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge tribunal is helping move us in a positive direction. It has aroused debate among Cambodians to an extent rarely seen in Cambodian history. Almost everyone in Cambodia has suffered in some way as a result of the Khmer Rouge tragedy.

Some of that debate has been tense, as citizens disagree about the requirements of key concepts like justice and reconciliation. But the dialogue restores a sense of equality among people, a sense that they are free to participate in public discussions and to have their voices heard. These basic freedoms create a culture of debate and deliberation. That culture is the foundation for a strong democracy.

A culture of dialogue helps Cambodians air their differences with mutual respect. Peaceful means of disagreement help to decrease violence and promote healing at individual and community levels. Dialogue and debate also infuse energy and creativity into our schools and promote better learning about the past and about necessary skills for building a strong society in the future.

Particularly important are the voices of women and ethnic minorities. Here in Cambodia, a majority of survivors of the Khmer Rouge period are women. Many have struggled to

raised children alone and have been keys to rebuilding our society, but they have had too little voice. Ethnic minorities also need to be included in the dialogue. If the Khmer Rouge genocide reminds us of anything, it is the need to protect the vulnerable groups in society.

Dialogue is also a key to ensuring respect for basic rights in the ASEAN region. We welcome the creation of the new ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission for Human Rights and progress toward an ASEAN human rights declaration. We encourage ASEAN officials to use them as ways to engage with citizens. That means a strong voice for civil society and for ordinary people. It is they who suffer most when rights break down, and it is they who offer the best hope for ensuring human rights are promoted and protected in the future.

We in Cambodia are proud that we are taking these steps to deal with the difficult aspects of our past. We are pleased to share this experience with our fellow ASEAN nations and to be a part of forging a stronger regional human rights regime.

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“...a society cannot know itself if it does not have an accurate memory of its own history.”

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