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Technical assistance and capacity-building**Situation of human rights in Cambodia****Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia, Thomas H. Andrews****Summary*

Cambodia is at a crossroads.

Will the government move to fulfill the significant, broad commitments that it has made to respect, protect and fulfill human rights? Or, will it continue to violate the human rights of its citizens by restricting freedom of expression and civic space, by arbitrarily applying repressive laws to crush political opponents, and by detaining scores of human rights defenders, political activists and journalists while stripping the political rights of others?

The stakes are high, particularly as Cambodia prepares to hold commune elections next year and national elections in the year that follows. Free, fair and credible elections will be impossible so long as political leaders remain behind bars or sidelined by restrictions on their political rights. Or, when electoral laws and administrative procedures disqualify viable candidates and bar popular opposition parties from competing.

The hope for Cambodia resides in its people and the leaders and organizations that are committed to building a future in which human rights are respected. The Special Rapporteur is grateful for the opportunity to meet many of them, including human rights defenders, environmental activists, representatives of civil society organizations, journalists, opposition political figures and humanitarian workers. They must be able to do their important work without fear of arbitrary arrest or undue restrictions on their human rights.

The Special Rapporteur urges Cambodian officials to set a course that advances human rights and justice for every Cambodian and ensures that the people of Cambodia can choose their future in free and fair elections.

As he issues this first report of his mandate, the Special Rapporteur remains concerned but hopeful. He looks forward to maintaining a constructive relationship with the Government of Cambodia and all who are working to promote human rights and the future that Cambodian people deserve.

* The present report was submitted to the conference services for processing after the deadline for technical reasons beyond the control of the submitting office.

I. Introduction

1. Viewed through a human rights prism, there are two Cambodias.
2. The first is the Cambodia that has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to human rights and the rule of law, ratified eight of nine core human rights treaties, supported 84 percent of recommendations made during its most recent Universal Periodic Review, hosted visits by UN Special Procedures, and welcomed international engagement and investment.
3. This is the Cambodia that will, in November, welcome world leaders for the 20th Summit of the International Organisation of La Francophonie (IOF), a global network of nations with a mission that includes promoting peace, democracy and human rights.
4. The second is the Cambodia that violates the human rights of its citizens by severely restricting freedom of expression and civic space, by arbitrarily applying repressive laws to crush political opponents, and by detaining scores of human rights defenders, political activists and journalists while stripping the political rights of others.
5. The Special Rapporteur has begun to examine cases of alleged arbitrary arrest and detention in Cambodia and believes there are likely more than 100 individuals who have been detained for their exercise of fundamental freedoms. Credible reports indicate that the number of people detained on these grounds has roughly tripled since the beginning of 2024. Government officials have defended the imprisonment of these individuals by claiming that convictions are consistent with Cambodian law. Yet, the penal code provisions used to imprison many of them are incompatible with international human rights law. Defendants have frequently been convicted despite no evidence being presented in relation to key elements of their alleged crimes.
6. Meanwhile, the government has used judicial and administrative processes to target activists, civil society organizations, labor unions and independent media. Authorities have arbitrarily applied laws, including the draconian Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations (LANGO), to curtail work on human rights, politics, the environment and other important issues. The fear of criminalization and reprisal has led to widespread self-censorship.
7. This disturbing trajectory casts a dark shadow over Cambodia's plans to hold commune elections next year and national elections in the year that follows.
8. In meetings with government officials, the Special Rapporteur stressed that free, fair and credible elections will be impossible so long as political leaders remain behind bars or sidelined by restrictions on their political rights. Opposition parties fear a repeat of past election cycles, when electoral laws and administrative procedures were arbitrarily applied to disqualify viable candidates and bar popular opposition parties from competing.
9. Without a course correction, Cambodia will remain on a path towards repressive, one-party rule that undermines accountability and the human rights of Cambodians.
10. The government of Cambodia has an opportunity and an obligation to change this trajectory.
11. Cambodia can build, through concrete action, an international identity consistent with its human rights commitments. It can do so by, among other actions, releasing those unjustly detained, lifting restrictions on freedom of expression, establishing a level political playing field, and reforming laws that are inconsistent with human rights standards.
12. Seizing this opportunity would serve Cambodia in a number of ways. It would advance the rights, dignity and quality of life of all Cambodians. It would make Cambodia a more attractive destination for foreign direct investment. It would weaken the case of critics, who dismiss Cambodia as a lawless state that threatens regional stability and security. It would enhance Cambodia's case that international law should be affirmed and embraced as the basis for resolving the border dispute with Thailand.
13. Meaningful change can occur in Cambodia when the requisite political will exists. There is no better illustration than the Cambodian government's shifting position towards the cyberscam industry. For years, the number of scamming operations grew, ensnaring

thousands of human trafficking victims while generating billions of dollars of illicit income from scam victims abroad.

14. Until recently, government officials routinely dismissed or downplayed reports describing the cyberscam industry's grip on Cambodia. In response to an August 2023 UN report citing estimates that at least 100,000 people had been forced to work in scam operations in Cambodia, for example, the vice chair of Cambodia's National Committee for Counter Trafficking in Persons said, "Cambodia is not so big. ... [I]f there are 100,000 scammers, where are they?"

15. In 2025 the government formed a Commission for Combating Online Scams, and in August of this year the head of the Commission announced that it had cracked down on 624 cyber scam sites and detained nearly 30,000 suspects. Government officials in July told the Special Rapporteur that 300,000 people involved in scam operations had left the country.

16. Where there is political will, there is a way.

17. While the Special Rapporteur has significant concerns about human rights in Cambodia, he was encouraged by the cooperation and frank engagement of government officials during his first official visit from 20 to 31 July. He met the Prime Minister, Senate President, and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice, the Prime Minister's Office, the Cambodian Human Rights Committee, the Commission for Combating Online Scams, the National Election Committee and the provincial government of Banteay Meanchey. Conversations with government officials were respectful and constructive and provided the Special Rapporteur with an opportunity to learn, firsthand, the views and perspectives of government officials.

18. The Special Rapporteur was given unfettered access to places of detention, where he met with individuals imprisoned for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. He met with opposition political figures, human rights defenders, environmental activists, representatives of civil society organizations, journalists, humanitarian workers and diplomats, among others. The fact that he conducted these meetings freely and without restriction demonstrated an openness on the part of the government and a willingness to engage on a range of serious human rights issues.

19. During his visit, the Special Rapporteur travelled to areas impacted by the border conflict with Thailand. The conflict has impacted the human rights of civilian populations on both sides of the border. Approximately 650,000 Cambodians and 400,000 Thai people were reportedly displaced by fighting at the height of the conflict, according to figures from the respective governments. More than 18,000 Cambodian civilians remain displaced. The Special Rapporteur spoke to displaced Cambodians who reported that they cannot return home because their houses have been destroyed or because of the presence of the Thai military in their towns or villages.¹ The economies of both countries and populations on both sides of the border are suffering from a dramatic reduction in border trade and labor migration. The Special Rapporteur has committed to working with the Thai and Cambodian governments to address human rights challenges associated with the conflict.

20. Officials told the Special Rapporteur about the significant progress Cambodia has made in improving the everyday lives of its citizens. This progress is highlighted by sharp reductions in poverty and child mortality and dramatic improvements in life expectancy, educational enrollment and access to electricity, water and sanitation.

21. These are notable achievements. Cambodia also faces significant economic challenges, however, from the need for greater foreign direct investment, to the crushing debt faced by growing numbers of families who have fallen victim to predatory micro-lending schemes, to the economic impact of the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand.

22. Respect for the human rights of all Cambodians must be at the center of the Cambodian government's response to these challenges.

¹ Thailand refers to the provision in the 27 December 2025 ceasefire agreement that both sides will "maintain current troop deployments without further movement."

23. Cambodia is at a crossroads. Will government leaders set a course of respect for human rights for all, or will they push Cambodia down a path of greater repression? Will they take steps to improve Cambodia's international image, seize economic opportunities, advance justice and provide Cambodians with the opportunity to choose their future in free and fair elections? Or, will disturbing trends, including arbitrary detention and restrictions on fundamental freedoms, undermine Cambodia's potential?

24. The Special Rapporteur looks forward to maintaining a constructive relationship with the Government of Cambodia. He is honored to have the opportunity to engage with Cambodian civil society, principled political leaders and human rights advocates who are working for the rights, dignity and quality of life of all the people of Cambodia and the future that they deserve.

II. Cambodia's international commitments and obligations

25. Cambodia has made significant commitments to respect, protect and fulfill human rights. It is party to eight of nine core human rights treaties, as well as the Refugee Convention and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.²

26. Cambodia regularly engages the Human Rights Council and human rights treaty bodies, including on reviews of its human rights records. In May 2024, Cambodia underwent its fourth cycle Universal Periodic Review by the Human Rights Council. Cambodia supported 84 percent of the recommendations made during the review, including recommendations relating to human trafficking, elections, fair trial standards, fundamental freedoms, legislative reform and marriage equality. Cambodia has also cooperated with and contributed to reviews by human rights treaty bodies, although its reporting has at times been significantly delayed.

27. As described above, the Special Rapporteur has enjoyed the strong cooperation and support of the Cambodian government since taking up the mandate in May and is particularly grateful for the government's facilitation of his July visit to the country.

28. Cambodia's international commitments will serve as a solid foundation for the Special Rapporteur's mandate, marking areas for potential collaboration towards meeting Cambodia's human rights obligations.

III. Arbitrary arrest and detention

29. The Special Rapporteur is deeply concerned about the arrest and detention of political activists, human rights defenders, environmental advocates, journalists and others for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. Ensuring that no one is imprisoned in Cambodia for their exercise of fundamental freedoms will be one of his top priorities in the coming months and years.

30. The Special Rapporteur has begun to examine reports, communications and private submissions concerning cases of alleged arbitrary arrest and detention. These documents include opinions by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, reports by the previous Special Rapporteur, reports and submissions from human rights and civil society organizations, and communications from detainees' family members and lawyers. During his visit to Cambodia, the Special Rapporteur visited four prisons and spoke with detainees. He also met with the family members of prisoners as well as activists who have been released from prison.

31. Based on information from these sources, the Special Rapporteur believes there are likely more than 100 individuals who have been detained for their exercise of fundamental

² Cambodia has signed but not ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Cambodia has only accepted the individual complaints procedure for one treaty, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

freedoms. Credible independent reporting indicates that there may now be roughly three times as many prisoners detained on these grounds as there were at the beginning of 2024.

32. Many of these individuals have been imprisoned under laws that are inconsistent with international human rights law. Among the laws most often used to arrest, charge and convict individuals for their political activities, or for exercising their rights, are criminal code provisions, including those relating to incitement (articles 494-496), plotting (453) and insults to the king (437-bis). The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has examined these and other provisions, finding that they are “vague,” “ill-defined,” “overbroad” and/or “imprecise” and therefore incompatible with international human rights standards.

33. Legal proceedings against activists, human rights defenders, journalists and others have often violated due process and fair trial standards. Some have reportedly been detained without an arrest warrant and have not been informed of the reason for their arrest. Defendants have not always had prompt or consistent access to counsel nor been given adequate time to prepare a defense.

34. According to defendants, lawyers and courtroom observers, Cambodian courts have often exhibited bias and a lack of independence, and defendants have sometimes been denied the presumption of innocence. Judges have admitted testimony given under duress while also preventing the presentation of exculpatory evidence. They have at times told defendants that exercising the right not to testify against oneself could infer guilt. Judges have interfered in the cross-examination of witnesses by the defense. Some hearings have not been publicly accessible, and media and family members have at times been barred from courtrooms. Defense lawyers have reported threats and harassment from judges and others.

35. Defendants have frequently been convicted despite no evidence being presented in relation to key elements of their alleged crimes. Judges have delivered guilty verdicts without providing written judgements laying out the reasoning behind the verdict. Trials and appeals have been affected by lengthy delays, often without explanation.

36. Dire conditions in Cambodian prisons threaten the rights, wellbeing and lives of detainees. The Special Rapporteur observed severe overcrowding in each of the prisons he visited, with some cell blocks holding more than two inmates per square meter of floor space. Prison directors acknowledged the problem and stated that prison populations were continuing to increase, exacerbating the dire conditions. Prisoners and prison staff also told the Special Rapporteur about poor food quality, inadequate clean water, and shortages of medicines.

37. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs told the Special Rapporteur that there is a commitment from the top of the government to address the problem. The Ministry of Justice explained that his ministry is exploring ways to reduce overcrowding, including through conditional releases, suspended sentences and pardons.

38. The Special Rapporteur is particularly concerned about the treatment of activists in prison. He learned that, at least in some prisons, those detained for their activism or political activities are held in high security cell blocks even though the length of their sentences does not justify a high security designation. Authorities have also sent activists to remote prisons far from their families, at times arbitrarily dividing groups of detainees between different prisons.

39. Several prisoners told the Special Rapporteur that authorities had offered them pardons if they apologized for their actions and joined the ruling party. The use of this type of pressure is reportedly common, with dozens of detainees having accepted such deals in order to gain their freedom. Many confessions by activists, journalists and human rights defenders have been recorded and shared publicly, undermining their ability to continue their work.

40. Some of those pardoned and released from detention are only partially free as they remain subject to restrictions on their personal freedoms and political rights.

41. During his visit to Cambodia, the Special Rapporteur repeatedly raised concerns about arbitrary arrest and detention during his meetings with government officials. He highlighted specific high-profile cases of detention, such as the case of five young human right defenders

detained in relation to their work with Mother Nature Cambodia, an environmental group, and called for the release of all those in prison for exercising their fundamental freedoms, suggesting that more than 100 people appear to be detained on such grounds.

42. Some Cambodian officials, including the Prime Minister and Senate President, vigorously defended Cambodia's justice system, stating that prisoners had been tried and sentenced according to Cambodian law. They also justified convictions in prominent cases raised by the Special Rapporteur by citing national security concerns and other threats to the government and Cambodian society. Nevertheless, officials agreed to work with the Special Rapporteur as he continues to examine these cases, including by providing further information and addressing the Special Rapporteur's concerns.

IV. Civic space

43. Exercising the right to freedom of expression, assembly and association in Cambodia is difficult at best. Judicial and administrative processes have been used to target civil society organizations, labor unions and the media, stifling their activities and the development of political and social movements.

44. The fear of criminalization or reprisal by authorities leads to widespread self-censorship in Cambodia. Even the most courageous activists and journalists told the Special Rapporteur that they are constantly mindful of the boundaries of permissible expression in Cambodia and know that certain topics are off limits.

45. The Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations (LANGO) is one of the primary constraints on civic space in Cambodia. Passed in 2015, the law establishes a system of mandatory registration that is inconsistent with the right to freedom of association. The terms "association" and "non-governmental organization" are defined so broadly that that they could apply to loosely affiliated or informal groups or gatherings, including grassroots networks or community-based groups that do not have the capacity to comply with the law's onerous financial disclosure and reporting requirements. LANGO gives authorities broad discretion to accept or reject an organization's registration, opening the door to selective application of the law. The ministries can unilaterally suspend or deregister groups, including for breaching a requirement to maintain "neutrality toward political parties."

46. Civil society leaders told the Special Rapporteur that complying with LANGO's registration and reporting requirements directs resources and focus away from their core areas of work. They also described the selective enforcement of the law against organizations that challenge the interests and narratives of the government and ruling party. Civil society leaders told the Special Rapporteur that their activities have been hamstrung by arbitrary delays in securing the necessary MOUs from relevant ministries to renew their registration.

47. The activities of Cambodian civil society are also hampered by other administrative processes, including restrictions arbitrarily imposed by local authorities and requirements to seek permission before holding activities. Local officials often deny approval of public events, forcing civil society to cancel activities, organize them in private homes, or find other workarounds. Civil society organizations raised concerns about surveillance, intimidation and threats by authorities.

48. Labor unions face serious challenges with their registration process. Labor leaders told the Special Rapporteur that the vast majority of registered unions are aligned with the government or employers. Unions that are not aligned with the government or employers routinely face lengthy delays in registration with the Ministry, which has broad discretion in approving applications under the Law on Trade Unions, or are denied registration altogether. One labor leader told the Special Rapporteur:

The Ministry of Labour says Cambodia is heaven for trade unions and always claims there are 6,000 trade unions. But very few of these unions work for the best interest of the workers. Most unions are aligned with the employers. In that case, they can be registered as quickly as possible.

49. The Special Rapporteur received credible reports that dozens of independent unions and labor federations are awaiting approval of their registration. Some having waited over four years since applying and others have applied multiple times after their applications were rejected for administrative reasons, including trivial clerical errors.

50. Cambodia's media environment is similarly constrained. Over the past decade, many prominent independent media outlets have been forced to sell, shut their doors, or move into exile following targeted attacks by authorities, including arbitrary tax demands and the revocation of licenses. The remaining mass media environment is dominated by business groups with close links to the government and ruling party.

51. Independent journalists are constantly confronted with the risk of arrest and imprisonment. This risk is particularly high when covering sensitive issues such as corruption, environmental degradation, the cyberscam crisis or the border conflict with Thailand. Many journalists have been arrested or threatened with prosecution or are subject to ongoing legal proceedings. Journalists have also been attacked and threatened with physical violence and have experienced sexual harassment. Journalists told the Special Rapporteur that they often self-censor, aware that there are certain boundaries they cannot cross with their reporting. One journalist told the Special Rapporteur:

We are not free to talk or say what we think. We have to think before we speak or we'll face consequences. We call ourselves independent media, but we can't report freely. We have to find a way to report that will not have a negative impact on us.

52. In the past year, the government has introduced new licensing and accreditation requirements that journalists described as onerous, unnecessary and arbitrarily applied. A new regulation on "Qualifications and Journalistic Professionalism" established qualifications for journalists and editors and requires license applicants to compile extensive documentation, including certificates of "good conduct" from local authorities, and submit to the Ministry of Information for approval. New rules on the issuance of press cards require that journalists have not faced legal proceedings or complaints, a major impediment to press freedom given the arbitrary legal attacks on journalists.

53. As reporting has increasingly moved online and to social media platforms, the government has taken steps to control online freedoms. The cases against many of those imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of expression stem from online posts by the accused. The government has also blocked the websites of independent and exile media outlets. A 2021 sub-decree on a "National Internet Gateway," which remains in force but has not been fully implemented, would greatly increase the government's online surveillance and censorship capacity if the gateway becomes fully operational. Draft laws on cybercrimes and cybersecurity and proposed "fake news" legislation could further restrict online expression.

V. Upcoming elections

54. In June 2027, Cambodia will hold commune and sangkat elections. National elections will follow in 2028. At issue is whether these elections will allow the people of Cambodia to freely choose the political parties and candidates who they believe offer the best hope for Cambodia's future. This will be determined by the degree to which this election cycle can overcome the deficiencies that plagued previous elections including restrictions on political competition, the exclusion of viable opposition parties and candidates, and concerns over the administration of the electoral process. The Cambodian People's Party (CPP) overwhelmingly dominates both chambers of Parliament. It holds 120 of 125 seats in the National Assembly and 57 of 62 seats in the Senate. This near monopoly in the legislature illustrates the absence of meaningful political pluralism and electoral competition in Cambodia.

55. The Special Rapporteur is deeply concerned by Cambodia's trajectory going into the 2026 and 2027 elections. Unless there is a change of course, the upcoming elections may well be characterized by the same repression and political exclusion that undermined the credibility and democratic legitimacy of previous elections.

56. The continued detention of opposition figures, activists and journalists signal a political environment that is anything but conducive to free and fair elections. The restrictions on the political activities of opposition leaders like Kem Sokha and Rong Chhun both violate their right to political participation and deprive voters of the opportunity to vote for the candidates of their choosing.

57. Political leaders told the Special Rapporteur that they fear that electoral laws will be applied in an unfair, arbitrary manner as they have been in previous election cycles. Ahead of the 2023 national elections, the National Election Committee refused to allow the Candlelight Party to compete because it could not produce the original certificate showing its registration with the Ministry of Interior, excluding the most popular opposition party from the ballot. The party said that the document was lost during a police raid on the headquarters of the Cambodia National Rescue Party, its predecessor which was dissolved in 2017, and that the Ministry refused to issue a replacement. Opposition parties told the Special Rapporteur that they feared authorities would use similar tactics to prevent them from competing in the upcoming elections.

58. Opposition parties also described how, in previous election cycles, election authorities applied extra scrutiny to registration documents for opposition candidates, at times disqualifying candidates for alleged defects or irregularities in their applications. The disqualification of candidates sometimes led to an opposition party's entire party list being thrown out and the party being unable to compete in a constituency. One opposition political leader told the Special Rapporteur:

The party in power will try to use powers under various laws to put pressure on the opposition. They impose double standards. For opposition parties and activists, they will monitor them and watch for any small mistake that could be a reason to block them. It is totally different to how it is applied to their own party. ... If there are complaints against the ruling party during elections, those complaints are not addressed.

59. Political leaders and opposition activists told the Special Rapporteur about the strong and unrelenting harassment and obstruction they face. Opposition parties and leaders often have trouble renting offices or homes, which they attribute to intervention by local authorities. Local government officials often withhold permission for activities by opposition parties and do not permit the display of banners supporting those parties. Party leaders report that authorities have applied pressure on their family members to influence their actions and decisions. One political leader told the Special Rapporteur that civil society organizations no longer engage with opposition parties because of the fear of official retaliation.

60. The harassment of opposition parties extends to rank-and-file members, often through the political weaponization of the government bureaucracy. Members and supporters of opposition parties often have trouble accessing public services or carrying out routine administrative processes with local authorities. Opposition members have reportedly been dismissed from government positions because of their party affiliation. The Special Rapporteur received many reports that opposition supporters have been denied access to the IDPoor poverty assistance program because of their political affiliation.

VI. Equality and non-discrimination

61. During his visit to Cambodia, the Special Rapporteur met with representatives of many different communities, including women, indigenous people, persons with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other gender-diverse (LGBT+) people. They described the stigma and discrimination that hinder their ability to fully participate in Cambodia's political, social and cultural life, while at the same time identifying progress that has been made in certain areas towards greater acceptance and inclusion.

62. The Special Rapporteur is very concerned with the limited role that women have been able to play in Cambodia's political process. Women make up only 19 percent of senators in the current parliament and 14 percent of the members of the National Assembly. Very few women were present—and even fewer had speaking roles—in the Special Rapporteur's

meetings with government officials during his visit to Cambodia. However, the lack of women's participation is not a problem that is limited to the government and ruling party. The leaders of opposition parties with whom the Special Rapporteur met during his trip to Cambodia were exclusively men. Men made up a vast majority of the participants in the Special Rapporteur's meetings with civil society organizations—except, predictably, meetings with women's and LGBT+ groups.

63. Women's groups raised concerns about the disproportionate burdens carried by women from displacement, indebtedness and other economic challenges. One women's rights advocate told the Special Rapporteur:

Women need economic justice. Many are struggling with debt and risking illegal migration. [Women are now] migrating back from Thailand. ... Women are expected to manage the family's finances, but, in reality, have little control, so they are vulnerable to loan sharks and illegal migration. Violations within families are increasing. Often violence towards partners is linked to debt. There is increasing toxic masculinity online. Men are creating group chats discussing how to "be a man" and control their wives.

64. Women's groups also stressed the need to strengthen Cambodia's Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims. The law, passed in 2005, requires local authorities to intervene when domestic violence occurs or is likely, but fails to clearly define some forms of gender-based violence and prescribes mediation or reconciliation for some forms of physical and sexual violence that should be criminalized. Women's groups welcomed the government's commitment to reforming the law but expressed frustration at the long delay in passing amendments.³

65. LGBT+ advocates told the Special Rapporteur about the discrimination and stigma that LGBT+ persons face, but encouragingly, they also described indicators of growing public understanding and acceptance. They stressed the importance they place on marriage equality. "Family means everything to us," said an LGBT+ advocate. "But when we don't have documents to register our families, particularly marriage certificates, it creates significant challenges for the equal recognition of our families and access to equal protection and services that the government makes available." Cambodia supported UPR recommendations to amend laws to provide for marriage equality and to strengthen the protection of the rights of LGBT+ persons. The Cambodian Human Rights Committee has engaged LGBT+ organizations about possible legal reform to this end. The Special Rapporteur is looking forward to supporting Cambodia as it moves toward legal marriage equality and equal rights for LGBT+ persons.

66. Indigenous people face discrimination, stigma, unequal access to government services and institutions, and many other challenges in Cambodia. Chief among their concerns are the difficulties they face securing legal title to their lands. Many indigenous communities have lost their land to economic land concessions or to the establishment of conservation areas. The loss of land leads to loss of livelihoods, with indigenous people sometimes facing criminal charges when they continue rotational agriculture or other cultural practices. Many have spent years or decades fighting to protect their land against claims by corporations and are disadvantaged by a court system that is often inaccessible to indigenous people because of language, transportation and other barriers. "The process of registration for indigenous communities is very slow, but registration of companies is very fast," said one indigenous leader. "Land loss affects our livelihoods, which are based on natural resources. After we lose our land, it is hard to survive. Our food, culture, religion and identity are gone. Our place to pray is lost."

67. Persons with disabilities face many human rights challenges in Cambodia, including discrimination and poor accessibility in public and private infrastructure. During his visit to Cambodia, the Special Rapporteur noted barriers to accessibility in many government buildings, including those constructed recently. Many of the challenges faced by persons with

³ During its 2024 Universal Periodic review, Cambodia supported a recommendation to amend the law.

disabilities in Cambodia are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs that drive stigmatization and isolation, although advocates acknowledge that awareness is improving.

VII. Economic, social and cultural rights

68. In the three-and-a-half decades since the Paris Peace Agreements were signed, Cambodia has dramatically improved the economic conditions of millions of Cambodians. Poverty was roughly halved between 2009 and 2019. Life expectancy increased 15 years between 1990 and 2023. Under-five mortality dropped by 75 percent over two decades. Educational enrollment and completion and access to electricity, water and sanitation have increased significantly.

69. Cambodia has made significant progress toward its Sustainable Development Goals targets, having already achieved some of its targets ahead of the 2030 deadline. Cambodia is scheduled to graduate from least developed country status in 2029. In 2025, Cambodia became the first country in Asia and the Pacific to achieve the global 95-95-95 HIV targets.⁴

70. Despite the progress that Cambodia has made in many areas, Cambodians still face serious challenges in realizing their economic, social and cultural rights. The conflict with Thailand and the cyberscam crisis, discussed in the sections that follow, have contributed to serious economic headwinds. During his visit to Cambodia, the Special Rapporteur frequently heard about the high level of indebtedness of many Cambodian households, which threatens their wellbeing and increases risks of exploitation. He is particularly concerned by predatory lending and abusive debt-collection practices in Cambodia's microfinance sector. Land-grabbing and forced eviction, often related to economic land concessions, are a major concern. Deforestation and climate change present grave threats to Cambodia's population, especially indigenous people, and not enough has been done to prepare climate adaptation measures.

71. The Special Rapporteur looks forward to further examination of Cambodia's successes and challenges in relation to economic, social and cultural rights in future country visits and reports to the Human Rights Council.

VIII. Cyberscams and the government crackdown

72. The operation of cyberscam networks and other criminal enterprises in Cambodia is one of the country's most pressing human rights challenges. These criminal enterprises have impacted both victims of human trafficking and people around the world who have been scammed out of billions of dollars. International criminal networks have historically taken advantage of endemic corruption, entrenched patronage systems and weak rule of law in Cambodia. In recent years, large-scale cyberscam operations sustained by industrial scale human trafficking and forced labor have become the dominant form of transnational criminality in Cambodia, reflecting a model of criminal activity that has been replicated across Southeast Asia.

73. It is difficult to precisely ascertain the scale of cyberscam operations in Cambodia. Credible reports suggest 100,000 or more people have been trafficked into scam compounds in Cambodia. Government officials told the Special Rapporteur that approximately 300,000 people involved in scam operations have left the country in the past year. Nationals of China and neighboring countries in Southeast Asia have made up the majority of trafficking victims and others working in scam compounds. However, they have also come from dozens of other countries in South Asia, East Asia and Africa.

74. Trafficking victims told the Special Rapporteur that they were lured to Cambodia with promises of well-paying jobs in administration or customer service. Their passports were then taken from them, and they were informed that they would have to carry out online scams to pay back a debt owed to their captors. One victim described a living hell of violence and

⁴ The 95-95-95 targets require that 95 percent of people living with HIV know their status, of whom 95 percent are receiving antiretroviral treatment, of whom 95 percent have achieved viral suppression.

torture that commenced when she asked to be allowed to return to her home. Victims have reportedly been locked in dark rooms for weeks on end, held in water containers, and shocked with electric batons, among other forms of torture. Sexual violence, harassment, threats and exploitation have been common in scam compounds, and victims have reported forced abortions. Some trafficked workers have reportedly been killed.

75. Cyberscam networks flourished in a political economy characterized by corruption, patronage, official protection rackets and symbiotic relationships between powerful criminal, business and political elites. Victims, witnesses and insiders have described the frequent presence of Cambodian police and local authorities inside active scam compounds where trafficked workers are held against their will. Cambodian authorities have been observed communicating with scam operators, receiving payments, providing security for scam compounds, and removing dead bodies.

76. Many high-ranking Cambodian officials have been credibly linked to cyberscam operations. The United States government has sanctioned two Cambodian senators and others with close relationships to Cambodia's political leaders for their role in scam-related human trafficking and forced labor and their ownership of businesses and facilities linked to scam compounds. Other Cambodian government officials and individuals with close political and familial relations with Cambodian leaders have also been credibly implicated in cyberscam enterprises. Scam kingpins have been government advisors and major donors to the Cambodian People's Party. Prominent businessmen with high-level political connections have reportedly invested in, and profited from, casinos, resorts, financial exchanges and other business enterprises linked to the scam industry.

77. In 2025 and 2026, the Cambodian government took significant steps to crack down on the cyberscam industry. In February 2025, it established the Commission for Combating Online Scams, headed by the Prime Minister. In July 2025, the government issued a nine-point order requiring various agencies and authorities to close scam compounds, enforce immigration laws, and scrutinize casino licenses, among other actions targeting the cyberscam industry. In April 2026, the National Assembly passed a Law on Combating Online Scams imposing sentences of up to life imprisonment for involvement in cyberscam operations.

78. These steps have been accompanied by an increase in law enforcement actions against scam compounds, including investigations, raids and arrests. Government officials claim that authorities have closed more than 600 scam locations and that more than 4,000 scam operators now face criminal proceedings. Authorities have reportedly revoked or suspended the licenses of dozens of casinos. In January 2026, Cambodia arrested Prince Group leader Chen Zhi and two of his associates, extraditing the men to China, where Chen faces a criminal investigation. In April, the government extradited Li Xiong, majority owner of Huione Group, a scam-linked financial institution, to China. In August, the Head of the Secretariat of the Commission for Combating Online Scams announced that there were no more scam compounds remaining in Cambodia.

79. The government's actions over the past year-and-a-half have significantly disrupted and reconfigured the cyberscam industry in Cambodia. Although the full picture remains unclear, it appears that scam operations have ceased in most large-scale scam compounds, many of which now lie vacant. Researchers, government officials and others told the Special Rapporteur that cyberscam networks have continued to operate in Cambodia, in some cases by changing locations and modes of operations. Many scam networks appear to have decentralized, dispersing their operations across numerous smaller sites and moving from urban to rural areas. In many cases, tip-offs from authorities have allowed scam operators to avoid arrest and to relocate their operations and trafficked workers to other locations in advance of raids.

80. The Cambodian government has, to date, failed to hold accountable some of the most senior Cambodian officials credibly linked to cyberscam operations. When the Special Rapporteur raised these concerns, the Prime Minister pointed to actions taken against some high-ranking officials while emphasizing the right to due process of those implicated in criminal activities. He stated that a foreign sanctions designation should not dictate the operation of Cambodian legal processes.

81. Both the Cambodian government and foreign governments have failed to meet their obligations to the tens of thousands of trafficking victims released from scam compounds in the past year, compounding the human rights crisis associated with the cyberscam industry.

82. Some government officials told the Special Rapporteur that authorities are screening those released from scam compounds in order to identify victims of human trafficking and that the government is providing food, shelter and support to these individuals. However, others, including the Prime Minister, indicated that Cambodia lacked the capacity to screen those released from scam compounds and was simply focused on returning them to their home countries. Experts and humanitarian workers echoed this characterization, telling the Special Rapporteur that the Cambodian government's general approach has been to treat those released from scam compounds as illegal migrants without attempting to assess whether or not they are trafficking victims. As such, trafficking victims have been held in overcrowded immigration detention facilities and fined for overstaying visas. Many have not been able to access lawyers. Cambodian police have often threatened and extorted those released from scam compounds.

83. While Cambodian and international NGOs have provided food, shelter or services to victims in some instances, the resources of these organizations are limited and have been stretched thin by the deluge of people released from scam compounds in recent months. Cuts to funding from USAID and other donor agencies have greatly reduced the capacity of service organizations to address the humanitarian and protection needs of individuals released from scam compounds in Cambodia.

84. The governments of trafficking victims have also failed them. While some victims have received support from their embassies in Cambodia after being released from scam compounds, many have not and have been stranded in Cambodia, unable to afford plane tickets home. The situation is often most dire for the nationals of small or distant countries, including many African nations that do not have embassies in Cambodia. Many governments have failed to properly screen people returning home after their release from scam compounds in Cambodia, while many trafficking victims have faced administrative penalties or prosecution in their home countries.

IX. Border conflict

85. During his first official visit to Cambodia, the Special Rapporteur travelled to the Thailand-Cambodia border to examine the human rights impacts of the conflict between the two countries. He visited a large relocation site constructed by the government and spoke with individuals displaced by the conflict. The Special Rapporteur received briefings on the conflict from many senior Cambodian officials, including the Prime Minister, President of the Senate and governor of Banteay Meanchey Province. The Special Rapporteur has also corresponded with the Thai government concerning the human rights impact of the conflict.

86. Many political, military and legal aspects of the Thailand-Cambodia conflict, including those relating to border demarcation and the attribution of responsibility for initiating hostilities, are beyond the scope of the Special Rapporteur's mandate. The conflict has, however, had a massive impact on the human rights of civilian populations on both sides of the border.

87. At the peak of the conflict in December 2025, approximately 650,000 Cambodian people and over 400,000 Thai people were displaced by the fighting, according to figures from the respective governments.⁵ More than 18,000 Cambodian civilians reportedly remain

⁵ The Thailand government has contested Cambodia's displacement totals, stating that some counted as "displaced" were "residing in areas Thailand previously opened up as temporary shelters in the late 1970s" and "did not return to Cambodia despite repeated protests formally lodged by the Thai side." Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, "Statement: Regarding the Statement by Mr. Tom Andrews, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Cambodia," 1 August 2026, <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/statement-reg-un-special-rapporteur-stmt-hr-cam-en>.

displaced as of September 2026. Dozens of civilians were reportedly killed on both sides of the border, with each government accusing the other of indiscriminate attacks.

88. The Special Rapporteur visited a large relocation site constructed by the Cambodian government for displaced persons in Banteay Meanchey province. The site shelters more than 13,000 people in 3,300 houses set on 20 x 30-meter lots that are suitable for small gardens or commercial activities. Smaller relocation sites have been constructed in Oddar Meanchey and Preah Vihear provinces.

89. Despite cash transfers, food distribution and other assistance programs by the government and NGOs, the situation for displaced Cambodians is dire. Many fled with only the possessions they could carry on their backs or motorbikes, leaving behind household belongings and livelihood assets. Those who remain displaced are primarily from villages or towns directly on the border. Many relied on cross-border trade or employment in Thailand for their livelihoods and have not been able to find new employment. Residents of the relocation site told the Special Rapporteur that they were struggling to feed and clothe their families and feared they would be unable to meet their basic needs in the coming months.

90. Displaced Cambodians told the Special Rapporteur that they are unable to return home because of the presence of the Thai military in their towns or villages. They described how the Thai military has used barbed wire, shipping containers and other materials to create barricades that prevent their return to their homes. Some described being threatened by Thai soldiers, who shouted and brandished rifles, when they approached the barricades. Some of the residents of the relocation site told the Special Rapporteur that their homes had been destroyed by the Thai military.

91. The Special Rapporteur travelled to the edge of Boeung Trakoun, a Cambodian town on the border with Thailand, where he saw a field of barbed wire and a barricade made from shipping containers topped by a Thai flag. The Thai military has reportedly cordoned off other Cambodian towns and villages in a similar fashion.

92. Publicly available satellite imagery appears to show the destruction of hundreds of homes and other civilian structures in areas now controlled by the Thai military.⁶ Destroyed structures appear to be primarily located in areas of overlapping territorial claims between the borders claimed by Thailand and Cambodia.

93. In response to the Special Rapporteur's written inquiries about these facts, the Thai government wrote that its "actions in the border area are aimed at protecting against threats and maintaining safety and security of its personnel and citizens in areas under the control and responsibility of the Thai side."

94. International humanitarian law clearly establishes that displaced persons have a right to return to their homes as soon as the reasons for their displacement cease to exist.⁷ The 27 December 2025 ceasefire agreement between Thailand and Cambodia committed both parties to "allow[ing] civilians residing in the affected border areas to return at the earliest, without obstruction and in safety and dignity, to their homes and normal livelihoods in areas within their own side." The ceasefire agreement also states that both sides will "maintain current troop deployments without further movement," a provision which the Thai government has referenced to counter allegations that it is illegally occupying or has annexed Cambodian territory. In its correspondence with the Special Rapporteur, the Thai government stated that "Thailand has no policy of invading or occupying the territory of neighbouring countries."

⁶ The Special Rapporteur has reviewed publicly available satellite imagery appearing to show the destruction of civilian structures in Boeung Trakoun. In its comments on the report, Thailand asserts that these civilian structures were destroyed during the conflict. See also, LICADHO, "Post-Ceasefire Razing of Cambodian Villages Likely Violates International Law," 20 January 2026, <https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/articles/20260120/205/index.html>; LICADHO, "New Images Show Thailand Razed Hundreds of Homes in Villages Along Border," 5 August 2026, <https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/articles/20260805/212/index.html>.

⁷ Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilians Persons in Time of War, 1949, Article 49; International Committee of the Red Cross, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Volume 1: Rules, 2005, Rule 132.

95. It is imperative that Thailand and Cambodia work together to expedite the return of displaced civilians.

96. The human rights concerns associated with the conflict are hardly limited to displacement. Approximately 900,000 Cambodian migrant workers have returned from Thailand.⁸ Workers abruptly lost incomes and livelihoods, and their families suffered as remittances dried up. The vocational skills of returned workers often do not match industry needs in Cambodia, and many remain unemployed.

97. The closing of border crossings has deeply impacted Cambodia's economy. Border communities relying on the trade of agricultural and other goods have been hit particularly hard. The price of agricultural inputs rose just as farmers lost access to sales markets in Thailand. According to Cambodia's Ministry of Interior, 15 schools and 7 health centers remain closed in border areas.

98. The Special Rapporteur stresses the importance of resolving the border conflict swiftly and peacefully so that affected communities can return to their homes, enjoy a stable and secure environment, and seize the economic opportunities that border trade can provide. The Special Rapporteur has offered his assistance and good offices to both the Cambodian and Thai governments to help address human rights challenges associated with the conflict.

X. Recommendations

99. **The Cambodian government can affirm its commitment to international law and human rights by ending the arbitrary arrest and detention and the judicial harassment of activists, human rights defenders, journalists, members of the political opposition and others, including by:**

(a) **Immediately and unconditionally releasing all those detained for exercising their human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association;**

(b) **Lifting all restrictions imposed on persons released from detention for exercising their human rights, including restrictions on freedom of movement and participation in public affairs;**

(c) **Initiating a program of judicial reform that ensures, among other outcomes, that fair trial rights are respected and that the decisions of judges are not influenced by political pressure;**

(d) **Ensuring that, in all criminal cases, courts issue written, reasoned and public judgments setting out the factual and legal basis for their decisions, including an assessment of evidence related to each element of the offense charged;**

(e) **Addressing prison overcrowding by reducing the use of pretrial detention, expanding alternatives to imprisonment, and reviewing the cases of persons who may be eligible for release or non-custodial sentences; and**

(f) **Ending punitive measures targeting detained activists, journalists and human rights defenders, including their placement in high security cell blocks and arbitrary transfer to remote prisons.**

100. **Cambodia's legal framework should be brought into line with international human rights law, including by:**

(a) **Reforming or repealing:**

(i) **Criminal Code provisions relating to incitement, plotting and insults to the king;**

⁸ In a letter to the Special Rapporteur the Thailand government stated that some of the 900,000 returning migrant workers had been in Thailand illegally, that it was not the policy of the Thai government to expel Cambodian workers, and that they had returned voluntarily. Senior Cambodian officials also publicly called on Cambodian workers to return from Thailand.

- (ii) The Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations;
- (iii) The Sub-decree on the Establishment of the National Internet Gateway; and
- (iv) The Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims; and

(b) Ensuring that pending and proposed legislation on cybercrimes, cybersecurity and “fake news” are either withdrawn or made to fully comply with international human rights law and standards.

101. The government of Cambodia should lift restrictions on civic space, including by:

(a) Ending the arbitrary or discriminatory application of registration and licensing requirements against civil society organizations, trade unions, media outlets and journalists; and

(b) Conducting prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigations into credible reports of violence, threats and harassment against human rights defenders, activists, journalists and others targeted for exercising their human rights, and, where sufficient evidence exists, prosecuting those responsible.

102. The government of Cambodia should ensure that upcoming elections are free and fair, including by:

(a) Prohibiting the arbitrary or discriminatory application of electoral laws against opposition political parties and candidates, including in ways that prevent or unduly restrict their participation in upcoming elections;

(b) Refraining from imposing arbitrary or discriminatory restrictions on the lawful activities of opposition political parties, including their ability to organize, campaign and communicate with voters in advance of upcoming elections;

(c) Ending the harassment of leaders and members of opposition parties, including through the misuse of administrative processes, such as arbitrary or discriminatory exclusion from the IDPoor program; and

(d) Welcoming independent election observers to witness all phases of elections, including political campaigning.

103. The Cambodian government should strengthen engagement with international human rights law and mechanisms, including by:

(a) Ratifying the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families;

(b) Accepting individual complaints procedures for all human rights treaties to which Cambodia is a party;

(c) Prioritizing the implementation of all recommendations supported by Cambodia during its fourth cycle Universal Periodic Review by the Human Rights Council; and

(d) Ensuring timely reporting to human rights treaty bodies.

104. The Cambodian government should advance equality and non-discrimination, including by:

(a) Prioritizing reforms to ensure legal marriage equality and equal rights for LGBT+ persons in consultation with LGBT+ organizations;

(b) Simplifying and streamlining processes for land titling by indigenous people, ensuring the accessibility of such processes, and providing full protection for collective ownership; and

(c) Addressing forms of stigma and discrimination that hinder the full involvement in political, social and cultural life by people from various communities, including women, LGBT+ people, indigenous people and persons with disabilities.

105. The government of Cambodia should further address the scourge of cyberscams by:

(a) Conducting thorough, independent and impartial investigations into all individuals credibly linked to cyberscam operations and associated human rights violations, irrespective of their position or status, including prominent business figures, politicians and government officials, and, where sufficient evidence exists, prosecuting alleged perpetrators;

(b) Extending investigations to individuals and entities that own or control casinos, resorts or other facilities that hosted scam operations, financial institutions involved in processing scam proceeds, and others with business and economic interests tied to the cyberscam industry in recent years;

(c) Conducting systematic, proactive screening of all persons released or removed from scam compounds in line with international standards and best practices in order to identify victims of human trafficking, and ensure that those identified receive adequate food, safe accommodation and appropriate protection and assistance;

(d) Refraining from detaining, prosecuting or otherwise penalizing victims or suspected victims of human trafficking for immigration violations or acts they were compelled to perform;

(e) Cooperating with UN agencies, humanitarian organizations and relevant states to identify and assist victims of human trafficking and facilitate their safe and voluntary return to their countries of origin, including by exempting victims from visa-overstay fees and other immigration-related penalties; and

(f) Providing media representatives, non-governmental organizations, UN agencies and other international partners with independent access to known or suspected cyberscam compounds and other locations associated with scam operations, in order to facilitate independent verification of the government's reported enforcement actions and the extent to which scam operations have been disrupted.

106. The Cambodian government can further address the human rights impacts of the border conflict with Thailand by:

(a) Continuing to work with international partners, humanitarian agencies and civil society organizations to provide food, shelter, healthcare and other assistance and services to those displaced or otherwise impacted by the conflict; and

(b) Refraining from detaining, prosecuting or obstructing journalists, human rights defenders or representatives of civil society organizations in relation to their work reporting on the conflict with Thailand or assisting those impacted.

107. The Special Rapporteur urges that the Royal Government of Thailand and the Royal Government of Cambodia:

- Engage constructively and in good faith to de-escalate tensions; respect and protect the human rights of all persons impacted by the conflict, including the right of displaced persons to return voluntarily and safely to their homes; and pursue measures that can advance a durable and peaceful resolution of the conflict.

108. Cambodian political parties should affirm their commitment to represent all Cambodians by:

(a) Engaging and welcoming all members of Cambodian society—including women, LGBT+ persons, persons with disabilities, and indigenous people—to participate in the political process; and

(b) Ensuring a significant increase in the number of female candidates in upcoming elections.

109. The Special Rapporteur urges that States:

(a) Engage the government of Cambodia to advance the expansion of civic space, promote the immediate and unconditional release of individuals detained for exercising their human rights, and urge the repeal or reform of laws that are inconsistent with Cambodia's international human rights obligations;

(b) Link bilateral and multilateral engagement, including economic or trade relations, to Cambodia's concrete progress toward meeting its human rights obligations;

(c) Publicly call on Cambodia to establish an open, inclusive and genuinely competitive electoral environment in advance of upcoming elections, including by ending the harassment of the leaders, members and supporters of opposition political parties and ensuring the impartial and non-discriminatory application of election laws and regulations;

(d) Call on the government of Cambodia to agree to allow independent and unrestricted election monitoring, including monitoring of political party and voter registration, the campaign period, and balloting;

(e) Conduct systematic screening of all persons returned from Cambodia in line with international standards and best practices in order to identify victims of human trafficking and ensure that those identified receive appropriate assistance and services;

(f) Cooperate with Cambodia to provide consular and other services to individuals released from cyberscam compounds; and

(g) Guarantee the principle of non-punishment with regard to victims of human trafficking who return from Cambodia, including by refraining from detaining, prosecuting or otherwise penalizing victims or suspected victims of human trafficking for acts they were compelled to perform.