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PRESS FILE

Hun Sen's Irreverence for Human Rights

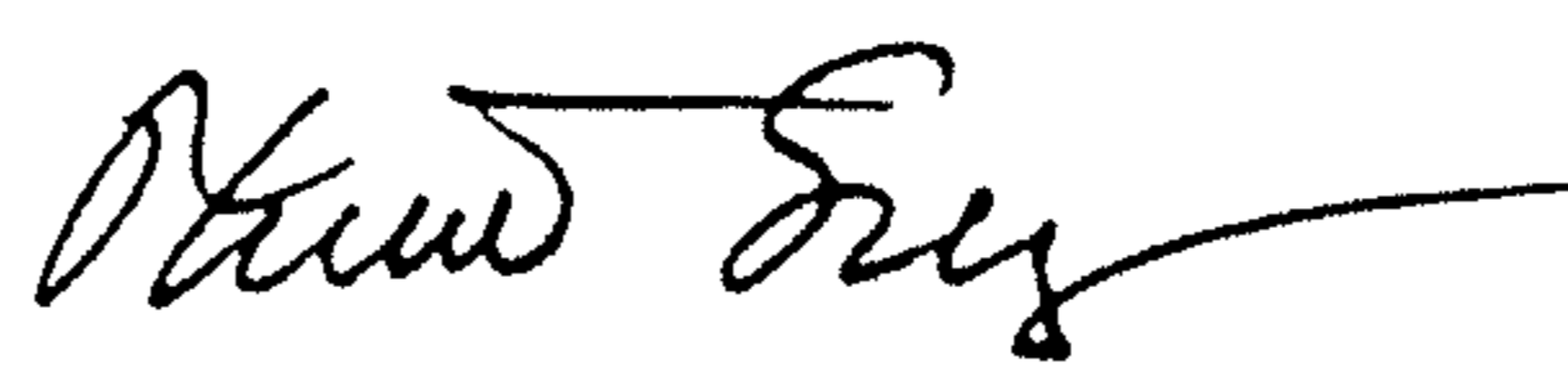
On Human Rights Day, December 10, 1996, Mr. Hun Sen, the Second Prime Minister of Cambodia, gave a statement in the Kandal Province. During the speech, he criticized some human rights organizations for giving only "lip services" and not engaging in the effort to "go to the countryside, fields, and factories and help push forward constructions". Prime Minister Hun Sen called on people to make efforts to promote these types of *human rights* in Cambodia. "If there is no food and clothing for children and no school for educating them, where lie the human rights," he asked.

While no one denies the need for more manpower in helping with the rebuilding of Cambodia, this task is hardly the main objective of human rights organizations. Human rights organizations exist to promote and monitor the rights and freedoms of individuals. They are not funded to distribute basic necessities. In the case of Cambodia, when people critical of the government are jailed or murdered, one must question the government's respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Its pledge to comply with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by United Nations General Assembly must also come into doubt. Therefore, it is the duty of human rights organizations and the right of all citizens to criticize any government when it does not seem to follow the rule of law. If such is called "lip service", much more lip services will be needed until the basic human rights of the people of Cambodia are fully respected.

The role of government, on the other hand, is to attend to these problems. Its officials are elected to serve the people who put them into office. This service includes promoting the welfare of its citizens and securing their basic human rights. Responsible governments and human rights organizations are actually working toward the same goal, the betterment of the people. As internationally recognized, independent entities, human rights organizations are in a unique position to point out abuses by governments and other groups.

With this in mind, it is puzzling to consider Mr. Hun Sen's current position. If poverty, disease, and famine are the problems, how do the persecution of individuals and the censorship of the media rectify this? Does being hungry, sick, or unemployed preclude one from speaking freely? In fact, a responsible government is expected to be even more diligent in maintaining the rights of its most disadvantaged citizens. Instead, it appears Prime Minister Hun Sen has chosen to capitalize on the vulnerability of the Cambodian people by using it as an excuse to remain oppressive. While martial law has been historically enacted in even the most democratic of countries, a government that invokes this authority during times of peace and stability should arouse suspicion.

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Pheach Srey
Secretary-General