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**MEDICAL GROUP CALLS FOR PRISON REFORM IN
CAMBODIA; CITES TORTURE, SPREAD OF TB,
OVERCROWDING, AND CHRONIC FOOD SHORTAGE**

In a report released today, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) urged the Cambodian Head of State, King Norodom Sihanouk, to improve health conditions, increase food allotments, and lessen overcrowding in Cambodia's prisons to avoid public health problems as the rainy season approaches. The Boston-based group called on the Cambodian authorities to put an immediate end to beatings during interrogations and shackling of inmates in some prisons. PHR also commended the Cambodian government for allowing local and international human rights organizations access to prisons over the past year, and urged the government to continue its policy of openness as a safeguard against future abuse.

The prison population in Cambodia continues to rise at an alarming rate. According to the 114-page report, *Health Conditions in Cambodia's Prisons*, the prison population increased twenty-nine percent in 1994. Severe overcrowding and diarrheal diseases continue to afflict prisoners, making conditions ripe for cholera epidemics and the unchecked spread of tuberculosis (TB) into the community as the country's rainy season arrives in the coming month. Heavy rains for



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weeks at a time will put enormous strains on overburdened sewage systems and add to contamination of already inadequate water supplies.

According to the report, co-authored by PHR, the American Refugee Committee, and the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons, conditions in the prisons fall far below minimum international standards established by the United Nations. Delays in food allotments for prisons have led to chronic food shortages that have worsened this year. PHR is concerned that these delays have resulted in near starvation for some prisoners. Severe overcrowding in Cambodian prisons has already led to the transmission of tuberculosis in several prisons and has led to increases in prisoner-on-prisoner violence.

"In recent weeks, a large number of prisoners escaped from Siem Reap Prison. In 1994 we reported on the escape of twenty-five men from Kompong Cham Prison. These outbreaks may have been prevented had the Government taken measures to stop overcrowding in the prisons," said Gabriel Otterman, M.D., a consultant to PHR and former clinical fellow of the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons, who directed the medical study.

The report documents prisoners languishing in decaying buildings, sleeping on overflowing latrines with little to eat and virtually no access to proper medical care and essential medicines. The practice of shackling prisoners continues, in violation of international and Cambodian law. In some prisons, inmates were shackled continuously, some for up to twenty-three hours per day. The team was disturbed to find patterns of systematic abuse of inmates in pre-trial detention. In one prison, an inmates' fingers were amputated during interrogation. In 1994, the median space per prisoner in T3 prison, located in Central Phnom Penh, was 2.8m². Since then the T3 prison population has swelled, increasing 56% in recent months.

"Despite general improvements in the judicial system since the completion of the UNTAC mandate and the ratification of the Cambodian Constitution in September 1993, progress in Cambodian prison reform has been marred by setbacks related to poor management, lack of a health regime for prisons, and the lack of standards," said Eric Stover, PHR's executive director. "PHR urges the Royal Government of Cambodia to include a protocol that regulates prison health care and protects prisoners from abuse as it looks at wider judicial reform."

Exactly one year ago, PHR called conditions in the Police-Judiciaire (PJ) Prison located in the heart of the capital of Phnom Penh, "a public health disaster waiting to happen." Designed to hold thirty to forty inmates, PJ prison housed 216 prisoners at the time of the visit. The inmates had received only one meal a day consisting of rice and thin soup and no provisions for personal hygiene. PHR urged the Cambodian government to take immediate action to ease overcrowding at the jail. Within weeks after the PHR appeal, Cambodia's Ministry of Interior ordered the immediate release of fifty PJ prisoners and transferred over 150 others to less crowded provincial jails. Cells at the facility were ventilated and regularly cleaned, and inmates were provided with sleeping mats and personal hygiene supplies. Meals were provided twice each day and the sewage system was completely overhauled and the latrines cleaned.

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PHR has publicly welcomed the measures taken by the Cambodian government to improve conditions at PJ prison jail, but remains concerned about the lack of adequate food and access to regular medical care for the forty-five inmates who remain in the jail.

"The government has to be vigilant about health conditions in all prisons. The prison population is burdened by overwhelming cases of TB, beriberi, and other illnesses. Seriously sick prisoners are rarely segregated from other prisoners," said Dr. Otterman. "Renovations, like the overhaul of the sewage system at T3 prison in Central Phnom Penh, are desperately needed in all of the prisons we visited. We call on international donors to include prison health reform as a priority in their funding programs."

PHR also urged the Royal Government of Cambodia to:

- issue public orders to all prison, military, and police personnel to stop the beating and extrajudicial punishment of suspects during arrest and interrogation;
- end the use of dark cells and isolation cells in prisons and the practice of shackling;
- provide the Ministry of Health and the Health Department of the Ministry of Interior with direct authority over and responsibility for delivery of health care to prisoners, including regular medical exams and updated medical records;
- establish a tuberculosis control program that provides for identification of infection and disease, treatment, containment, and recordkeeping through regular screening of all prisoners;
- deliver regular food allotments;
- segregate men and women prisoners and adult and juvenile prisoners;
- institute regular exercise and sports routines in prisons, allowing prisoners a minimum of one hour each day for physical activity; and
- distribute provisions for personal hygiene to each prisoner on a regular basis

A medical team, assembled by PHR, the American Refugee Committee and the Columbia College of Physicians & Surgeons, studied health conditions in thirteen of Cambodia's twenty-four prisons for a five month period in 1994 and a two month period in the beginning of 1995. The visits were undertaken in collaboration with the Prison Assistance Program of the U.N. Center for Human Rights, with the full cooperation of the Royal Cambodian government.

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) is a Boston-based organization of health professionals, scientists, and concerned citizens which uses the knowledge and skills of the medical and forensic sciences to investigate and prevent violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. PHR adheres to a policy of strict impartiality and is concerned with the health consequences of human rights abuses regardless of the ideology of the offending government or group. Charles Clements, M.D. is President; Carola Eisenberg, M.D., is Vice President; Eric Stover is Executive Director; and Susannah Sirkin is Deputy Director.