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8.3.95

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTION: CAMBODIA - AID

THE FOLLOWING IS THE TEXT OF A QUESTION WITHOUT NOTICE AND ANSWER GIVEN IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ON 8.3.95.

MR ROBERT BROWN - MY QUESTION IS DIRECTED TO THE MINISTER FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AND PACIFIC ISLAND AFFAIRS. I AM SURE THE MINISTER IS AWARE OF THE REPORTS CONCERNING WIDESPREAD CORRUPTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE IN CAMBODIA AS A RESULT OF THE WIDESPREAD COMMUNITY CONCERN ABOUT THIS MATTER. WOULD THE MINISTER ADVISE WHAT THE GOVERNMENT'S INTENTIONS ARE CONCERNING THOSE REPORTS AND WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THOSE REPORTS FOR AUSTRALIAN AID TO CAMBODIA?

MR BILNEY - LIKE THE HONOURABLE MEMBER, I HAVE NOTICED REPORTS OF CORRUPTION IN CAMBODIA. THEY ARE WIDESPREAD AND I FEAR THAT THEY ARE OF CONSIDERABLE SUBSTANCE. I AM ENCOURAGED, HOWEVER, BY THE FACT THAT CAMBODIAN LEADERS THEMSELVES ARE BEGINNING TO RECOGNISE PUBLICLY JUST HOW SERIOUS A MATTER THIS IS FOR CAMBODIA. INDEED, AT A CONFERENCE IN PHNOM PENH ON 2 AND 3 MARCH, CAMBODIAN MINISTERS WERE ADMIRABLY FRANK IN ACKNOWLEDGING THE EXTENT OF CORRUPT PRACTICES AND THE NEED FOR CHANGE IN THEM.

THE SECOND PRIME MINISTER, HUN SEN, CALLED FOR AN ANTI-CORRUPTION LAW; A STRONG, INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATORY MECHANISM; BETTER PAY FOR PUBLIC SERVANTS; AND A PROGRAM WHICH WOULD EDUCATE THE PUBLIC NOT TO OFFER BRIBES TO OFFICIALS. HE ALSO ENDORSED A STRONG WATCHDOG ROLE FOR THE MEDIA.

HAVING BEEN GIVEN A FRESH START BY THE PARIS PEACE ACCORDS, CAMBODIA HAS NOW REACHED A CROSSROADS WHERE IT CAN CHOOSE EITHER THE PATH OF A JUNGLE ECONOMY WHERE THE POWER OF THE BRIBE IS GREATER THAN THE POWER OF LAW; OR IT CAN CHOOSE SOUND ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT, TRANSPARENCY AND THE SUPREMACY OF THE LEGAL PROCESS. AUSTRALIA IS, OF COURSE, A MAJOR DONOR OF DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE TO CAMBODIA AND ALL THE DONORS ARE SAYING TO THE CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT THAT NOW IS THE TIME TO NIP THE TREND OF CORRUPTION IN THE BUD - DIFFICULT AS IT IS TO DO - AND NOT LATER WHEN IT IS TOO LATE.

THIS IS NOT A THREAT, AS SOME HAVE SUGGESTED, BUT WE ARE SAYING THAT DONORS' TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN THE CAMBODIAN SYSTEM, TO WHICH THEY ARE COMMITTING LARGE AMOUNTS OF TAXPAYERS' MONEY, NEED TO BE STRENGTHENED. THE NEED FOR STRONG MEASURES AND LEADERSHIP IN STAMPING OUT CORRUPTION IS JUST ONE ASPECT OF ENTRENCHING GOOD GOVERNANCE IN CAMBODIA. STRENGTHENING THE APPARATUS FOR THE PROTECTION OF CAMBODIA'S HUMAN RIGHTS IS ANOTHER. IN THAT REGARD, AUSTRALIA HAS PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE, NOT LEAST THROUGH THE EFFORTS OF JUSTICE MICHAEL KIRBY, WHO IS THE UN RAPPORTEUR ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN CAMBODIA - AND A VERY FINE AUSTRALIAN - AND ALSO THROUGH THE WORK OF JOHN HOLLOWAY, OUR FORMER AMBASSADOR TO PHNOM PENH, WHO NOW PROVIDES ADVICE AND GUIDANCE TO THE CAMBODIAN MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS.

THROUGH SUCH INTERACTIONS, AND IN MANY OTHER FORA, WE HAVE SET OUT VERY FORCEFULLY TO SENIOR CABINET MINISTERS - INCLUDING TO BOTH PRIME MINISTERS AND MOST RECENTLY TO MR KEAT CHON, THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE AND THE ECONOMY, WHEN HE VISITED AUSTRALIA RECENTLY - OUR CONCERNS ABOUT GOOD GOVERNANCE, ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CORRUPTION.

I WILL BE RAISING THESE SAME ISSUES SHORTLY AT THE THIRD MEETING OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF CAMBODIA AT WHICH I WILL BE LEADING THE AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION. THIS IS A MEETING WHICH BRINGS TOGETHER ALL THE AID DONORS, THE WORLD BANK, THE ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK AND THE CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT. OUR MESSAGE AT THAT MEETING WILL BE THAT WE UNDERSTAND THE DIFFICULTIES AND THAT PROGRESS DOES NOT HAPPEN OVERNIGHT; BUT THE HONEYMOON IS OVER AND THE CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT WILL NEED TO DEMONSTRATE TO DONORS EVIDENCE OF ITS COMMITMENT TO THE ACCOUNTABLE DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES TO WHICH IT AGREED IN THE PARIS PEACE ACCORDS. THOSE ARE LEGITIMATE EXPECTATIONS ON THE PART OF DONORS AND IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THE CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT UNDERSTAND THAT CLEARLY.