

Phnom Penh, February 13, 2001

*Similar letters have been sent to  
World Bank President James Wolfensohn  
and IMF Managing Director Horst Kohler*

Mr. Tadao Chino  
President  
Asian Development Bank  
Manila

By kindness of Mr. Urooj Malik  
ADB Representative  
Phnom Penh

Mr. President,

We represent 334 farmer families from Banteay Meanchey province, Kampot province and Sihanoukville municipality, but your Representative in Cambodia can tell you that there are hundreds of thousands of families like ours in this country who have become landless. We would like to draw your attention to the plight of Cambodian landless farmers and ask you to push the Cambodian government to urgently implement a land reform that is the cornerstone of any consistent poverty reduction program supported by the Asian Development Bank.

As for countless other farmers in other parts of the country, our land has been unfairly confiscated by powerful people who do not hesitate to deprive us of our only means of subsistence. The land taken from us has been transferred to businessmen engaged in land speculation and the gambling industry (in Banteay Meanchey province, near the Thai border, they plan to build more casinos on our land).

Farmers represent more than 80 percent of the Cambodian population and, according to a study by Oxfam GB published in *Cambodia Development Review* (September 2000), the percentage of landless farmers is continuously growing: From 3% in 1984, it increased to 13% by mid 2000. Given the accelerating pace of land seizure, it could reach 16% this year. This phenomenon contributes to the surge in the unemployment rate and to the aggravation of poverty throughout the country. No serious poverty reduction program can ignore the necessity and the urgency of a land reform designed to ensure that all farmers have adequate land to live on. The long-awaited reform would help the poorest people in the countryside sustain a decent standard of living, therefore helping reduce the number of slums and beggars in the cities, cut the crime rate and stop the development of prostitution and other activities generating a high social cost for the country. The reason for continuously postponing the implementation of such a crucial reform is not due to a shortage of financial or human resources, as often reported, but to a lack of political will since the reform would threaten the entrenched interests of the ruling party and its business associates who have managed to own most of the country's most valuable land.

The Asian Development Bank should strongly push for a land reform because, on top of its positive impact on the living conditions of the poorest segment of the population, it would provide a new momentum to the ongoing budget reform by improving fiscal transparency and political accountability. As a legacy of the communist system in place from 1975 throughout the 80's, some three fourths of the land in this country is still in the hands of the State, which is presently nothing else than the ruling party that still controls the whole public administration. Their apparatchiks dispose of the public domain without any transparency and accountability, running a parallel budget that fosters corruption and ruins the country. Every year, public land deals generate millions of dollars that go to private pockets. A land reform would produce a much needed increase in tax collection and State revenues to serve the needs and the interest of the entire Cambodian people, and above all, it would be a decisive contribution to the rule of law.

Yours sincerely,

Siv Yoeun, male, 59,  
representing 244 families from Banteay Meanchey province

Koam Chhun Ly, male, 57  
representing 51 families from Kampot province

