

Media Statement  
For Immediate Release

NGOs Express Grave Concerns about the Resettlement Process  
of the Railways Project  
1 November 2010

A coalition of NGOs including Housing Rights Task Force, NGO Forum on Cambodia, Sahmakum Teang Tnaut, and Bridges Across Borders Cambodia, have written to the heads of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Australian international aid agency AusAid expressing grave concerns about the treatment of people affected by the GMS Rehabilitation of the Railways in Cambodia Project. ADB is contributing US\$84 million in concessional loans and AusAid US\$21.5 million in grants to the project, which stands to impact at least 4,000 families living along the tracks.

The letters bring attention to the tragic deaths of two children at the resettlement site in Battambang. The brother and sister, 13 and 9 years of age, drowned in a nearby pond where they went to collect water for household chores because piped water had not been installed at the site before the families were relocated there.

Interviews with resettled families in Battambang have revealed a plethora of serious problems relating to a lack of access to food and basic services, and increased impoverishment. It appears almost all families have been forced to borrow money to survive, rebuild their homes, and connect to electricity. In some cases, families earn less per day than their interest repayments. Widows have been treated particularly unfairly and in some cases have not received separate plots of land. Instead, they have been told to live with their parents or children, despite living separately at their former location. These women are extremely vulnerable and have received insufficient support, if any.

Similar problems along the Southern Line in Sihanoukville have also been documented. Families report that inadequate compensation rates, coupled with inadequate services and facilities at the site, have made resettled residents vulnerable to increased poverty, unsanitary health conditions, and worsened living conditions.

Concerns were also raised that similar problems would occur in Phnom Penh once resettlement begins due to poor resettlement planning and a lack of information and meaningful consultation.

The NGO coalition called for reparations for the aggrieved family of the two children who drowned in Battambang.

“The ADB seems to have learnt few, if any, lessons from its involvement in the resettlement process for the rehabilitation of National Road 1 some years back. We are seeing the same problems, the same muddled process. Development of the railways will be a benefit to Cambodia but this type of process only goes to compound poverty for those already on the edge,” said Nora Lindström, Advisor at Sahmakum Teang Tnaut. “In relocating families to an incomplete resettlement site, the project is already in violation of ADB resettlement safeguards.”

“ADB and AusAid should not start the project without clear resettlement plans,”

added Chit Sam Ath, Executive Director of NGO Forum on Cambodia. “If there are negative impacts - that is people get worse off - they should be urgently investigated and responsibility for the harms should be accepted.”

The coalition also called upon ADB and AusAid to temporarily suspend loan and grant tranches for the project until the problems are rectified and the conditions at the resettlement sites are improved in line with ADB safeguard policies and international human rights law.

“The Cambodian Government has shown time and again that it is simply not capable or willing to respect the rights of people who are displaced by development projects and ensure that they are not harmed as a result,” said David Pred, Executive Director of Bridges Across Borders Cambodia. “There was no reason to believe that this time would be any different, which makes it all the more important for there to have been sufficient resources set aside for the resettlement process and a robust external monitoring system in place.”

“ADB and AusAid need to make sure that these problems are addressed before releasing more funds for the project,” added Sia Phearum, Secretariat Director of the Housing Rights Task Force.

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