

Date 28 January 2016

**National Workshop on the Consultation on Draft Regulations and Procedures on Voter
Registration for the Preparation of the New Voter List**

**Welcoming remarks
Wan-Hea Lee, OHCHR Representative in Cambodia**

Excellency Sek Bunhok, President of the National Election Committee,
Distinguished members of the National Election Committee,
Excellencies from the diplomatic and donor community,
Distinguished members of the political parties and civil society,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to welcome you here today. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is pleased to support the National Election Committee to hold this meeting toward the implementation of the right of all persons to vote and to participate in the conduct of public affairs, two essential human rights guaranteed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Cambodia is a party.

The interest of the United Nations in seeing a sound electoral system established in Cambodia may be traced to the first election organized in 1993 under the auspices of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia, or UNTAC. At that time, the civilian head of UNTAC, Mr. Akashi Yasushi, explained that “UNTAC is here,” he said, “to help Cambodians exercise their full democratic rights, respecting the rights and liberties of others.” Twenty-three years on, long after UNTAC’s operation ended, the United Nations remains keen to see Cambodians exercise their full democratic rights, respecting the rights and liberties of others.

The ultimate aim is the conduct of a credible and peaceful election, in which all eligible voters are able to participate, all candidates can campaign without fear or obstruction, and whose results are widely accepted. The UN Secretary-General expressed it this way in his latest report on elections to the General Assembly (A/70/306) : the credibility of an election “is related to the extent to which both international obligations are respected and the election process is professional, accurate, impartial and transparent in all stages of its administration.” He continued that “a genuine election is one in which the result reflects the freely expressed choice or choices of electors and is therefore broadly accepted.” Toward that end, there is a “need to both mitigate winner-takes-all and high-stakes politics in an election and strengthen the procedural elements of the election itself.”

The exercise of “full democratic rights” in a credible election begins with a proper voter registry. Today, we will review how the NEC will ensure that every person – and only those persons – with the right to vote and wishing to exercise that right will be on the registry. It is obviously an enormously complex exercise when it involves millions of persons.

In this regard, I note with appreciation the assistance rendered by the European Union and Japan, which is helping both the literal and figurative “election machinery” of Cambodia to modernize with new technology and methodologies under a very tight schedule. I sincerely hope, like all of you, that the new system reflects a close examination of the major complaints related to the 2013 national election and ways to prevent them in the future.

In this regard, I recall that in its resolution 70/168, the UN General Assembly “reiterate(d) the role of civil society and the importance of its active engagement in the promotion of democratization, and invite(d) Member States to facilitate the full participation of civil society in electoral processes.” Today’s meeting responds to that recommendation. I look forward to seeing the opportunity of this meeting used to thoroughly review the draft Regulations and Procedures and, if deemed necessary, to improve them based on your collective wisdom and your common goal of seeing credible elections take place in 2017 and 2018.

Looking forward, I recall the recommendations of the then UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Cambodia, Prof. Surya Subedi, on the matter of voter registration. The current measures being taken would appear to satisfactorily address two of his concerns at the time, which were on the issuance and use of fraudulent identity documents and on the provision of proper voter identification documents. He further suggested to ensure that “Any Cambodian citizen eligible to vote should be entitled to request registration with the electoral and/or local authorities at any point during the year. Once a card has been issued, it should be valid for life unless a change in personal circumstances warrants amendment.” In other words, the Special Rapporteur believed that the considerable work done to register voters should be drawn upon at every election. I hope to learn today from the NEC of its plans to ensure the sustainability of the new voter registration process.

Since no system is 100% foolproof, the need for independent monitoring will always remain high. Cambodia is blessed to have a vibrant civil society capable of playing this role. For it to do so, details will need to be shared about the process. The full voter lists will need to be accessible in a way that enables analysis and assessment. Draft laws and rules need to be released and widely circulated with sufficient time to allow for thoughtful reflection and meaningful consultation. Clear instructions on how disputes arising in the voter registration process are to be dealt with will be needed by electoral officials, election monitors, and the general public. Lessons from the previous elections point to a need to significantly improve the credibility not only of the election process itself but also the associated dispute resolution mechanisms.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

A human rights lens obliges us to give consideration to specific target groups that are easily overlooked – and often are – including persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, illiterate persons, and homeless persons, persons who have been arrested and detained but not convicted, among others. The need to promote the political participation of women has been a focus of special attention globally, which is reinforced in the universally accepted Sustainable Development Goals. Much has been reported about the desire of Cambodians abroad to exercise their right to vote.

One of the lessons of the UNTAC experience is that a truly inclusive process is one that reaches out to persons that are not in the mainstream of society, either in the physical or social sense, rather than one that expects persons to find their own way. The quality and reach of civic education endeavours will be important in engaging these groups. The preparation of accessible versions of all the materials for public dissemination has proven useful, such as illustrated materials, instructions set out in simple language, and braille versions.

There are many things that need to be in place to ensure that the right to vote is guaranteed, and many ways that this right can be derailed. I look forward to hearing your views and to seeing the electoral system in Cambodia strengthened. At the start of the “new year season”, I leave you my sincere wishes for a happy, successful and peaceful new year, filled with the four Buddhist blessings in abundance.

Thank you for your attention.