



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Human Rights in Cambodia and Laos: Challenges and Opportunities

**Wednesday, December 16, 2015
10:00 AM – 11:00 AM
2261 Rayburn House Office Building**

Opening Remarks

Good morning. On behalf of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, I welcome you to our briefing this morning on the human rights situation in Cambodia and Laos. I extend a special thanks to our panel of human rights experts and activists from the diaspora community for taking time to educate us today, and for your ongoing work on behalf of human rights. Finally, I thank the Commission staff for organizing the briefing.

I have served in the U.S. Congress for 19 years, but I face an election every two years. Since I was first elected, control of the presidency has changed parties two times, and control of the House and Senate has also changed. So, when I see one man holding executive power for more than thirty years, as in the case of Prime Minister Hun Sen in Cambodia, or one party ruling for 40 years, as in the case in Laos, it raises questions in my mind about the quality and competitiveness of the countries' political systems. How are Cambodian and Laotian citizens able to exercise the basic freedoms and rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights when a few at the top seem to hold all the cards?

I recognize that governments take many forms and nations make progress on human rights at varying paces. Unfortunately, as we will hear today, in Laos and Cambodia there is backsliding: an unmitigated land grab crisis has displaced more than half a million people; civil society and opposition political leaders are being neutralized by threats, abuses of law, and sometimes even through force; and new laws restrict the independence of NGOs and the right to

expression. These developments are reminiscent of authoritarian periods in the two countries' history.

But if you believe as I do that government exists for the people, not the other way around, and that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose 67th anniversary we celebrated last Thursday, serves as a floor and not the ceiling of how a government should treat its citizens, then you will agree that the leaders of Cambodia and Laos must do better. I look forward to hearing from the panelists today about what the U.S. government, as well as Congress, can do to advance human rights in those two nations as part of the Administration's focus on Asia.

I now turn the microphone over to Morton Sklar, executive director of Human Rights USA, who will moderate the discussion.