Trade Union World Briefing

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Cambodia: textile workers face a gloomy future

In a year's time, in January 2005, the export quota system for textiles will come to an end and Cambodia will be brought into direct competition with countries such as China with their unbeatably low prices. Many fear that 2005 will see a massive relocation of production to China's textile factories. If they are right, it will come as a very hard blow to Cambodia, whose textile industry is the largest supplier of jobs in the private sector and the linchpin of an economy still struggling to overcome the ravages of war: 200,000 people, 90% of whom are women, are employed in Cambodia's textile factories. Although working conditions remain very hard, some improvement has been seen since the signing in 1999 of a trade agreement with the United States, which links increases in the quota of textiles exports to the US with improvements to workers' rights in Cambodia.

What is the situation of textile workers in Cambodia today? What are the prospects for post-2004? How influential are Cambodia's trade unions? This report considers these questions.

A job in textiles… if there is nothing better

The textile industry is the largest private-sector employer in Cambodia. Although working conditions have been improving, thanks, among other things, to the trade agreement signed with the United States, exploitation of workers is still rife because there are more people willing to work than available jobs.

According to a recent study carried out in collaboration with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a Cambodian worker needs a salary of 80 dollars a month

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Working conditions are improving in Cambodia, although very slowly. *(Photo: S.G.)*

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to live in decent conditions and support a family. The minimum wage in the textile sector is currently only 45 dollars. Employers are therefore in a powerful position when it comes to asking their workers to do overtime. As many of the workers generally come from far-flung villages and live in makeshift lodgings in industrial zones, they are all the more inclined to work longer hours, since they rarely have any social life outside work. But there is a considerable difference between occasionally agreeing to do overtime and being forced by one's boss to do it under threat of dismissal, as is so often the case in the textile sector. The latest ILO monitors' report (1) confirms independent trade unionists' accounts of an involuntary policy towards overtime in a great number of factories and of overtime hours exceeding legal limits.

"I earn 65 dollars a month if I do two hours overtime every day," explains an employee of the In Fong Garment Co. factory on the outskirts of Phnom Pehn. "It's a trap: if I refuse the overtime my salary would be too low and the production line I work on would not be able to operate, which would penalise my colleagues who want to work overtime. So workers are under immense pressure to agree to overtime." In some factories, the managers force workers who refuse to work overtime to put their fingerprint on a letter written in Chinese. If their fingerprint is taken three times they are dismissed.

INEFFECTIVE INSPECTIONS

Under Cambodian law, overtime cannot exceed two hours a day, but many employers ignore these laws and there is little chance of the labour inspectors stopping them. Indeed, as in so many developing countries, there are too few labour inspectors in Cambodia. They are badly equipped, badly paid and have very low budgets for their visits. As a result, many inspectors are easy to bribe and often announce their visits in advance, giving the employers time to prepare. "Many employers force their workers to do 4 or 5 hours overtime a day," points out An Nan, a legal advisor at the Cambodian Labour Organisation (2). "They manage to counceal this by blocking the timekeeping machines once the two-hour overtime limit authorised by law is reached. When labour inspectors or buyers ask to check the hours worked, the employer simply shows them the readings from the timekeeping machine. The real overtime hours are recorded somewhere else." Some employers use the piecework system of payment to avoid paying for overtime. "In some cases, employers only start to calculate the amount of overtime when the worker has reached a production quota equal to the minimum wage of 45 euros, which is against the law," explains An Nan.

Despite these violations of workers' rights and low wages, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians still dream of working in the textile industry, as it is the only sector to take on such large numbers of people with little education.

Employers argue that it is the workers who ask for overtime in order to earn more money, and that they will look for work elsewhere if they are not offered extra hours. Undoubtedly, this argument would not hold water if the minimum wage were set at a level that afforded workers a decent standard of living, but employers are strongly opposed to any increases in the minimum wage, and those trade unions which are controlled by the government or managers support this position. "I will strongly protest any increase in the minimum wage," states Ray Chew, general secretary of the Garment Manufacturers' Association in Cambodia (GMAC). "Many workers are lazy, so the wage should not be set any higher. We need high productivity, so it's better to use the piecework system of payment." Cambodia's independent trade unions do not, of course, share this view.

UNION PRESENCE LIMITS THE DAMAGE

The fraudulent calculation of overtime and bonuses is more common in factories where there is no trade union, as most workers are unaware of their rights. In these cases, employers use a series of dishonest tactics to make even larger profits from their workers. Those without union representation are usually unaware that, for example, they are entitled to a meal or a meal allowance when working overtime.

Some employers deduct as much as 7 dollars from workers' salaries if they take a day's holiday - an astronomical amount of money in view of the fact that the basic wage is just 1.50 dollar a day. They also exploit the absence of trade unions by setting unreasonably long probationary periods (set at 3 months by law), during which they can pay workers below the minimum wage, or by forcing their staff to sign short-term contracts, only renewable if the worker does not join a union.

Despite these violations of workers' rights and wages too low to ensure a decent standard of living (see page 6), hundreds of thousands of Cambodians still dream of working in the textile industry, as it is the only sector to take on large numbers of people with little education. Its importance is even greater in the rural areas of Cambodia, where access to arable land is becoming increasingly difficult owing to a combination of factors. These include the privatisation of vast stretches of land, the poorest Cambodians having to sell their land to pay off their debts, and an increase in the size of the population.

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A growing number of people living in rural areas can no longer rely on agriculture for a living and depend on salaried work. Given the shortage of such work in the countryside, they leave for the towns where there are very few jobs in the formal sector for unqualified workers except in textiles. The few jobs available in tourism require some knowledge of foreign languages or other skills that are not so easy to come by in rural Cambodia. The situation is all the more difficult for girls, as parents usually put their boys first when it comes to education.

After so many decades of war, textile manufacturers, seeking to profit from the quota system (see page 4) and an easily exploitable workforce, are the only companies to have invested on a large scale in Cambodia. The prospect of the quota system ending in 2005 is a grave source of concern for workers, who are torn between the fear of seeing their factories relocate to China and the desire to see an improvement in their standard of living. ●

(1) Available on the ILO site at http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/ifpdial/publ/cambodia7.htm
(2) An NGO supporting Cambodian unions and workers (Web site: www.clo.org.kh)

Trade unionists under pressure

Respect for freedom of association has improved considerably in the textile sector since the ILO began its monitoring visits (see page 4). At the same time however, attempts to indimidate and divide trade unionists remain widespread.

Compared to direct competitors like China or Vietnam, some might say Cambodia is a haven for trade union rights. The Khmer kingdom has ratified ILO convention 87 on freedom of association and 98 on rights to organise and bargain collectively. Its laws guarantee the right to form a union and not to be discriminated against as a result of doing so. In practice, however, several obstacles stand in the path of free trade unions, which are, in any case, a relatively new concept in this country despite the many training seminars held by international organisations (including the ICFTU) on this issue in recent years.

One of the most serious constraints on free trade unionism is the increasing number of unions with close links to the government or employers. Only a minority of the federations established in Cambodia regard workers' interests as a real priority. Several independent observers estimate that just 15 to 20% of workers in the Cambodian textile industry are members of unions that are genuinely fighting for their welfare. "Attempts to corrupt trade unionists is a major problem in Cambodia", according to An Nan, a legal adviser with the Cambodian Labour Organisation. "Sometimes employers increase the wages of union delegates as sweeteners or offer large sums of money in return for giving up court cases. Another problem is that some unions exaggerate their membership figures. Added together, the number of members the textile unions claim to have is higher than the total number of workers employed in the sector!"

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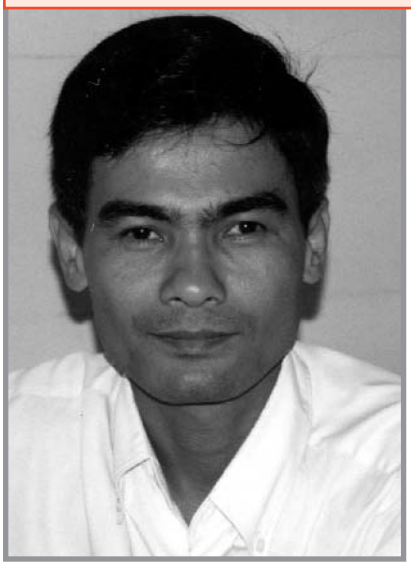
Sacking workers who are union activists is not uncommon in Cambodia, as highlighted in an official complaint made to the ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association in 2003 by the FTUWKC (Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia). The complaint concerns the dismissal of about 30 of FTUWKC members in the private sector for the role they played in forming a trade union. Chea Vichea, President of the FTUWKC, was among the sacked workers when working for the clothing factory INSM in Phnom Penh. "As happens elsewhere, some employers accept trade unions and others don't", he explains. "Some multinationals like Gap put pressure on their suppliers to respect the rights of their workers. Others, on the other hand, do not get involved in labour matters and their suppliers tend to threaten to sack trade union activists or subject them to a whole series of punishments such as moving them to more difficult work in different sections, or even increasing their production quotas in return for higher wages".

Fearful of attracting international condemnation (and a drop in export quotas), Cambodia's authorities and employers do not dare to resort openly to violence in order to break up workers' protest movements. Instead they pay thugs to put pressure on them. "When we carry out protests such as demonstrations, the authorities sometimes send members of the "Pagoda Boys", a group of young people with close links to the ruling party, who harass and sometimes attack us", explains Chea Vichea. "The police simply look on as they destroy our loudspeakers and banners and even when they hit workers. On the other hand, when workers try to defend themselves, they are attacked by the police". There is a danger that the image of trade unions will be tarnished. Part of the population associates trade unions with the violent incidents that sometimes accompany protest actions without realising that they are provoked by people who have nothing to do with free trade unions". ●

At the moment of going to press we learnt of the assassination of Chea Vichea, shot in cold blood in Phnom Pen on 22 January . The ICFTU sent an immediate strong protest to the Cambodian authorities and lodged an official complaint with the ILO. (http://www. icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991218894)



Trade union leader Chea Vichea, sacked for his commitment to workers' rights. (Photo: S.G.)

Export processing zones with or without unions?

Last year, the Cambodian government announced plans to create three export processing zones along its border with Thailand. The move is aimed at attracting Thai investors since labour costs in Cambodia are less than half those in Thailand. In addition, Thailand's excellent road infrastructure would provide the zones with a perfect export route via Bangkok, as an alternative to Cambodia's road network which is in a fairly bad condition. Investors would also benefit from attractive financial incentives. However the initial outline of the legislation did not include any provisions for Cambodian unions to be active in these zones. Protest campaigns organised by Cambodian unions and NGOs have led to a revised version of the draft law that is more favourable towards the principle of freedom of association but falls short of going into any clear details. The revised bill has yet to go before the parliament of Cambodia.

A trade agreement benefiting workers

Cambodia must ensure respect for workers' rights if it wants to increase textile exports to the United States. The ILO is in charge of organising labour inspections in this respect.

The economic activity generated by the textile industry benefits the whole of Cambodian society (Photo: S.G.)

In January 1999, the governments of Cambodia and the United States signed a trade agreement on textiles and apparel aimed at improving working conditions in the sector in Cambodia. The agreement, originally covering a three-year period, was later extended until December 2004. It offers Cambodia the possibility of increasing its textile export quota every year (from 18% to the maximum) if it can prove that its labour laws and the international standards governing this sector are being duly applied. The ILO (International Labour Organisation) has to prepare two reports a year on compliance with these criteria. The reports are based on factory visits carried out by a team of inspectors known as "monitors". Although the US government is under no obligation to take these reports into account, they undoubtedly have an impact on its decision.

At the outset, employers in Cambodia were none too happy about agreeing to these ILO inspections. But greater confidence has been gradually built up, thanks to the regular increases in export quotas since the system came into force, and the fact that the monitors discuss the reports with the companies before they are published. Irregularities detected by ILO monitors in a company are not quoted in the next report. The companies are given a period of grace during which they can take measures to ensure compliance, failing which their names are published in the following report. The Cambodian unions support the ILO inspections but point out that it would make more sense if government inspectors carried out these inspections, on condition that they were well equipped and not corrupt.

DIFFERENT VERSIONS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE FACTORY

"Unlike the government labour inspectors, we do not announce out visits in advance," explains one of the ILO monitors. "We form teams of two or three inspectors, depending on the size of the company. We pay an initial visit, during which we meet the factory managers, check the payslips, health and safety conditions, etc., and meet the workers. Then, during our second visit, we focus more on the workers, asking them questions outside the factory premises. What they say outside the factory is often very different from the version they give when their employers are around. We also use a whole range of other techniques to find out what's really going on in the factory, such as asking the food vendors with stalls facing the factory gates if they can tell us about the overtime hours usually worked. The unions are, of course, another good source of information."

The latest report prepared by the ILO monitors, which covered 61 garment factories (1), points out that no evidence of child labour was found, except for two minor incidents. Observers from the world of work have unanimously supported the validity of this finding. Indeed, given the international sensitivity over this issue and, above all, the number of adults willing to work for the derisory wages paid by these factories, virtually no children can be found in such workplaces (although this does not mean that workers can afford to send their children to school). More astonishing, however, is the claim that no evidence of discrimination was found, except for two cases of sexual harassment. Although this type of abuse is, admittedly, a taboo subject in Cambodia, the fact that the ILO team was, until recently, almost exclusively comprised of men serves to explain the lack of information gathered on the issue. This may be set to change in the future as three women now form part of the team of 11 monitors. All of them are Cambodian.

Poor working conditions, irregularities in the payment of wages, long overtime hours and threats against trade unionists are still serious problems within the textile sector in Cambodia, as the ILO monitors' reports show. But the pressure these report bring to bear on employers is slowly contributing to progress in the right direction for workers. Major apparel buyers such as Nike, for example, have made it clear that they are continuing to import from Cambodia because of this agreement and the guarantees it provides at a social level. Hence, it is critically important that the ILO inspections are pursued after 2005 when the "carrot" now offered, that is, increased export quotas, is completely withdrawn. The US government is committed to covering half the budget for these inspections between January and December 2005, and the other half will have to be shared between the government and the textile companies. Nothing has yet been decided beyond these dates. ●

(1) Available on the Internet at http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/ifpdial/publ/cambodia7.htm

Major threat looms after 2004

The end of the export quotas system threatens the whole future of the textile industry in Cambodia. What will happen to its 200,000 jobs once the Khmer kingdom is in full competition with giants like China, which have much more restricted working practices?

The areas where the clothes factories are located, on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, brim with people at the times when workers arrive and leave. In addition to the tens of thousands of factory workers, mainly women a whole host of other trades dependent on the factories crowd into the narrow streets: lorry and bus drivers, snack bar owners and motorbike-taxi drivers are just some. The economic activity generated by the garment factories embraces many other workers. As one explains: "These areas were deserted ten years ago, before the first textile factories came. We are afraid the same thing will happen after 2005 if the buyers all invest in China".

January 2005 will see the end of the WTO's Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC), which replaced the Multifibre Agreement (MFA). These agreements provide an export quota system for the clothing industry drawn up by developed countries for developing countries. The quotas allocated to highly competitive exporting nations like the Korean Republic and Hong Kong tend to be relatively low whilst those allotted to less competitive exporters are high. This system has encouraged clothes exporters to look for available quotas all over the world, which has helped in turn to create millions of jobs in countries that previously had only a small clothes export industry, or none at all. That has applied to Cambodia, whose clothes exports to the USA rose from 0.06 million dollars in 1995 to 953.3 million dollars in 2002.

There is concern amongst all countries with high quotas, since they are not sure if they will be able to keep the investment in the clothing industry and the jobs it generates beyond 2005, faced with competition from countries like China, whose production capacity is virtually limitless and whose labour force is exploited to such an extent that it is very cheap. For Cambodia this is a vital issue, since the textile industry's share of overall exports went up from 8 % in 1995 to 96.5 % in 2002 (1). It is the largest official private sector employer in the country, with approximately 200,000 employees, 90% of whom are women.

If the textile industry had to cut down its production significantly in Cambodia that would be a catastrophe for the country, since no other economic sector could absorb the tens of thousands of workers who would lose their jobs. Unfortunately, apart from its relatively favourable working conditions, which appeal to those buyers that are concerned about their image, the Cambodian textile industry has very few advantages compared to its competitors. Investors frequently stress the "bad points": high energy and transport costs, the need to import nearly all components needed for clothes production (sewing machines, materials, buttons, etc.) and widespread corruption. According to the Cambodia Development Resource Institute, Cambodia lost around 70 million dollars in "bureaucratic costs" (a euphemism for corruption) during the year 2000, which was equivalent to 7.2 % of that year's overall value of exports. Statistics from the American embassy in Cambodia suggest that were it not for those costs, the average wage in the textile industry could be as much as 98 dollars per month, i.e. the decent wage that workers would like. "These expenses are pushing up the cost of the administrative documents that are needed by ten times," stresses an investor from Hong Kong. The same businessman also rails against transport costs, which are too high mainly because of the poor state of the country's roads. "To transport a container load of raw materials from port to factory costs about 200 dollars in Vietnam and 700 dollars in Cambodia".

The company owners are mostly Asians though not from Cambodia: barely 9% of the textile factories in the country are owned by Khmers, with the rest shared between investors from Hong Kong (22%), Taiwan (19%), China (9%), South Korea, Malaysia, etc. (2). So they cannot be expected to act sentimental if the quotas are removed: if it's in their economic interests to leave Cambodia for China they will go ahead with mass redundancies, as is currently happening in Bangladesh. ●

(1) Source: United States Embassy, Cambodia.
(2) Source: WAC, 2001.

Campaign against child labour

The province of Kompong Chan, in the east of Cambodia, has a vast number of rubber and tobacco plantations. The workers barely earn enough to live on and their children have to join them in the plantations in order to boost the family income. The ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) has set up a committee to campaign against child labour, which includes seven Cambodian trade union federations. They have been carrying out awareness-raising campaigns and are beginning to get some concrete results in the plantations of Kompong Chan. Under pressure, particularly from the unions, most companies owning rubber plantations have, for example, agreed to build or renovate schools near the workers' homes, whilst the government has undertaken to pay the teachers' wages. To encourage workers to send their children to school, these companies offer families 10 kilos of rice and 1.2 dollars a month for every child registered in a school. Some of the results have been spectacular: in the "Chup" company, for instance, the union confirms that whilst 80% of employees' children did not attend school in the past, 70% of them now do so. In the tobacco plantations children are often used for carrying water needed for crops, often over long distances owing to the lack of supply points. The union at the only factory that buys tobacco leaves in the province of Kompong Chan persuaded the owner to offer interest-free loans to planters to enable them to buy water pumps. That option, coupled with the awareness-raising campaigns run by the union, has resulted in over 50% of workers' children in the tobacco plantations now attending school, a proportion that could not have been hoped for before the ILO project began.

"Workers know they should send their children to school, but poverty has prevented them from doing so", explains Noun Rithy, the national coordinator of this ILO project. "When they are strong, the unions are able to convince employers to join the struggle against child labour. But before that, workers need to be told what a union is and have it explained to them that unions are not there simply to defend workers' rights in the narrowest sense, but also to prevent abuses like child labour and to raise awareness of issues such as AIDS." ●

The plight of Cambodia's working women

A total of 90% of Cambodia's textile workers are women. Underpaid and poorly housed, they also have to endure humiliation and rumours circulating about them in their home communities.

Low-paid women workers have to live together in cramped conditions, (Photo: S.G.)

Every year 3000 young women leave the rural areas of Cambodia to seek work in the textile factories which are largely located in Phnom Penh. Although the number of textile factories has increased from 48 in 1996 to 248 in 2002, bringing an additional 200,000 workers to the city, the available accommodation has not increased accordingly. Many new arrivals do not have relatives in the capital and struggle to find a place to live. Factory dormitories are rare so the workers cram into makeshift huts on stilts that they build themselves or the ramshackle accommodation hastily constructed by unscrupulous property developers keen to capitalise on the workers' poor circumstances. In most cases, three or four workers share a room or small hut of no more than 10 to 15 square metres, for which they each pay 5 dollars a month.

In such a conservative society as Cambodia, the fact that workers from very different backgrounds have to live together in such small spaces is all the more problematic given that the majority of textile workers are women. There is no running water or toilets in the huts around the factories and the women are therefore obliged to wash outside, using buckets filled with rainwater. When possible, they do so in the dark to avoid being spied on by the men who roam the area (travelling salesmen, taxi drivers and men looking for work). Furthermore, there are numerous hygiene problems, as the huts and permanent housing are generally built on wasteland or on the side of dirt roads. Dust is therefore a constant problem during the dry season, as is mud in the rainy season.

"BAD" GIRLS?

Women working in textiles have a bad reputation in Cambodian society. They are often considered to be "bad" girls in their home villages, as they live far away from their families and, under such circumstances, are free to go out with men. Many marriage engagements are broken off when the family of the groom-to-be find out that the future wife is working in a textile factory. The men employed in textile factories tell those back home not to marry these women workers because they are no longer virgins. "Some of the women say that they are criticised if they go back to their villages with new clothes; but if they go back with old clothes people say that they have spent all their money going out with men, and have no money left to buy clothes," explains the Women's Agenda for Change (WAC) in a report on the circumstances endured by working women in Cambodia (1).

The women workers generally feel that the people from their home villages do not realise how hard their lives are, yet are more "tolerant" of them when they send handsome amounts of money to their families every month. "It's unfair," says a 21-year-old garment worker who has been working in Phnom Penh for 3 years. "My family encouraged me to leave the village to come and work here so that I could support them financially, and now I'm criticised, even though I've never had a boyfriend, because I live in a building where there are also men. I am sacrificing my youth for them, and all I get in return is a bad reputation." It is more commonplace for girls to leave their villages to work in textiles, because boys are prioritised when it comes to education in Cambodia, and are relied on more to help with work in the fields.

BREAKING THE TABOOS SURROUNDING HARASSMENT

As in many other countries, the problem of sexual harassment in and around the workplace is a subject difficult to broach. Most observers claim that harassment in the textile sector does not exist or is very rare. But a closer look reveals that Cambodia is not in fact such a fortunate exception. The non-governmental organisation WAC is leading initiatives to provide education and set up networks for Cambodian women facing difficulties. The activities include a social gathering every Sunday at the WAC premises in Phnom Penh, where women come together to dance, sing and share their experiences. The women often feel able to talk more openly in this safe environment. "Few workers dare talk about the sexual harassment they suffer in the workplace," explains WAC coordinator, Rosanna Barbero. "But when we show films in which the victims of such abuse do dare to talk, we have noticed that all the women are moved to tears; it seems as if they are reminded of an experience they have all suffered. Women queue up every morning at the factory gates to ask for work. Some girls have told us that the recruitment officers often make them stand in a line so that they can choose the prettiest, and then call them into their office. Others explain that they are harassed on the way to and from work, especially when they work overtime and go home late in the evening." Few women dare to tell the unions about such abuse as most of the

trade union representatives are men.

According to WAC's estimates, despite the housing difficulties and the indignities they suffer, around one fifth of Cambodian women aged between 18 and 25 work in the textiles sector. Many have had to pay out large sums of money to convince recruiters to employ them. "I, like others who work in my factory, had to pay 100 dollars to get recruited," says a young unionised worker employed at the Sam Han factory in Phnom Penh. "If I were a man, I would have had to pay up to 200, as the bosses would rather employ women. My family had to borrow the money; the families of other workers have had to sell land to raise such an amount. It is absolutely essential that I keep my job now as otherwise I would never be able to pay back my family's debt. I earn 65 dollars a month and send 20 to 30 dollars to my parents. I pay 5 dollars for lodgings, so have barely one dollar left for all the rest, such as food, clothes, transport to and from work and so on." ●

(1) "Garment workers", WAC, 2003. WAC (The Women's Agenda for Change) is a project run by Oxfam Hong Kong. Its Web site is http://www.womynsagenda.org/

Garment workshop brings hope to victims of trafficking

In Cambodia, poverty forces tens of thousands of women and children into prostitution. Some are just 5 years old when they are dragged into this modern day form of slavery yet the Cambodian authorities turn a blind eye. In contrast, the NGO AFESIP (1) is taking active steps to prevent such trafficking, to rescue victims, and reintegrate them into the world of work.

Decent work brings renewed hope to victims of human trafficking.

Since there is very little work in the formal economy, a reasonably educated Cambodian woman will not find it easy to secure a decent job. The difficulties faced by a former prostitute with no schooling, traumatised by years of rape and humiliation, suffering from chronic disease, and ostracised by her family are even more intense. This scenario moved AFESIP to take care of these women outcasts of society. The NGO has set up a number of schemes to provide accommodation, care, and training for women and children rescued from prostitution. Once this has been achieved, the AFESIP then helps them to find a job. Yet their experiences can mean that they are suffering from poor physical and mental health and therefore the working and living conditions of women working in Cambodian companies (see page 6) are even more difficult for these victims of trafficking to endure.

As a consequence, AFESIP has launched a pilot project to create a garment workshop, located in the small village of Tloc Tchroeu, in Kompong Cham province, on the banks of the Mekong River. The workshop can employ up to 20 women workers who enjoy good working conditions, a decent wage, and a friendly working environment, in stark contrast to most of the country's textile factories. They produce high-quality silk garments that are sold in shops in Spain (where AFESIP's founder Somaly Mam is a well-known figure, who was presented with a prestigious award for international cooperation) and in retail outlets frequented by tourists in Cambodia.

"Production is, of course, more difficult in rural areas as the infrastructure is worse, the power supply is less reliable and communications are poor but we wanted the workshop to be based in the countryside as that is where most of the trafficking victims originally come from," explains Pierre Legros, director of AFESIP International. "It's also a way of promoting rural development in Cambodia by creating small businesses in the countryside. We are trying to set an example as very little is being done on this front at the moment."

As with all trafficking victims who undergo the AFESIP rehabilitation programme, women working in the workshop are able to benefit from free medical and mental health care for the first three months following their departure from the residential centre. "They are more prone to illness than other textile workers, due to their recent experiences and the malnutrition they often suffered during childhood," explains Ana Chico, an advisor for the management of the workshop. "So we offer them more sick days than the traditional private sector, and also fund their health insurance. The fact that they can earn a living in a decent job helps them to regain their self-esteem as well as their respect for others."

The workshop, set up in February 2003, is yet to make a profit. Its output remains too low to be exported on the large scale needed to make major savings in transport costs. AFESIP is determined to develop a network of buyers in Western countries during 2004 to enable it to expand the workshop and take on more women workers. Once the workshop starts to make a profit, part of the income generated by this small business will be used to support other AFESIP initiatives. ●

(1) Acting for Women in Distressing Circumstances, www.afesip.org

Peace at last!

A brief look into Cambodia's recent past helps to shed light on the issues facing the country's workers today. From the Vietnam War to the Pol Pot massacres and Vietnamese occupation, Cambodia has long been the scene of unrelenting adversity. The latest coup took place as recently as 1997.

Formerly a French protectorate, Cambodia gained its independence in 1953. Twelve years later, the kingdom broke off diplomatic links with the US and allowed North-Vietnamese troops to set up bases within its territory, as part of their fight against the US-backed government of South Vietnam. The US launched a heavy counter-offensive between 1969 and 1973 with US bombers razing wide expanses of the eastern territories of Cambodia, killing thousands of people and making hundreds of thousands of refugees among the civilian population. During the military offensive, head of state Norodom Sihanouk was overthrown by a coup d'état in 1970 whilst he was travelling outside the country. Prime Minister Lon Nol subsequently seized power in the war-torn country yet Sihanouk, exiled in Peking, refused to relinquish power and formed an alliance with a rebel movement called the Khmers Rouges, in an attempt to overthrow Lon Nol. On 17 April 1975, Lon Nol was eventually overthrown when Phnom Penh surrendered to the Khmers Rouges just two weeks before the fall of Saigon.

FOUR YEARS OF TERROR

The Khmers Rouges, under the command of Pol Pot, established a totalitarian regime which sought to wipe out the educated Khmers and all Western symbols. All city dwellers were forced out into the countryside, where they were made to work in the fields like slaves for twelve to fifteen hours a day. The slightest act of disobedience led to on-the-spot execution. Sihanouk, who had returned to Phnom Penh in September 1975 as head of state, resigned three months later. The Khmer Rouge regime was soon in conflict with Vietnam, which eventually invaded Cambodia in December 1978. On 7 January 1979, Vietnam overthrew the Pol Pot regime which had caused the deaths of over two million people, almost a fifth of the Cambodian population, from starvation, exhaustion or execution. The Khmers Rouges sought refuge in the jungles and mountains on either side of the Thai border.

Peace at last, after decades of war and political turmoil in Cambodia. (Photo: S.G.)

In the meantime, the Vietnamese authorities established a government led by two former Khmer Rouge officers, including Hun Sen, the then Cambodian Prime Minister. The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, which continued until 1989, came under constant attack from various guerrilla movements including the Khmers Rouges (principally backed by Thailand and China). This led to the flight of tens of thousands of refugees to Thailand. The US embargo on Vietnam dealt another serious blow to the Cambodian economy. Following the departure of the Vietnamese troops in 1989, Hun Sen sought to attract foreign investors by bidding farewell to socialism. He achive little succes mainly because of the relentless attacks led by the Khmer Rouge rebels.

A TENSE POLITICAL CLIMATE

A peace treaty was finally signed in Paris in 1991. The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was placed in charge of supervising the running of the country and preparing it for democratic elections. The legislative elections of May 1993 led to the setting up of a coalition government in which the parties of Norodom Ranariddh (son of Sihanouk) and Hun Sen struggled to share power. The monarchy was re-established with Sihanouk reinstated as the King of Cambodia in September 1993. Thousands of Khmer Rouge guerrillas laid down their arms following an amnesty decreed by the government. Followers of Pol Pot still, however, controlled part of the country. In 1997, the Cambodian capital became the scene of renewed fighting. Hun Sen overthrew Prime Minister Ranariddh in a coup. Whilst in exile, Ranariddh was charged in absentia for arms smuggling and colluding with the Khmers Rouges, yet received a royal pardon from King Sihanouk in March 1998 on Hun Sen's request. New elections were organised in 1998 and in July 2003, which were marred by accusations of widespread irregularities. Hun Sen's CPP (Cambodian People's Party) won the most recent election, but did not win the two-thirds majority needed to govern alone. In early December, the CPP and its two main contenders (Ranariddh's FUNCINPEC and the party led by Sam Rainsy) had still not come to an agreement on the make-up of a new government.

Following several decades of war, the people of Cambodia finally received some good news in 1998: the death of Pol Pot and the defeat of the last remaining Khmer Rouge fighters, who laid down their arms following a government-led offensive. At present, the population is waiting impatiently for a tribunal to be set up which will try the Khmer Rouge leaders., This should have been convened months ago with the help of the United Nations. ●

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