

**Open Letter**  
**Regarding the Discriminatory and Potentially Life-threatening Treatment of HIV-affected Families from the Community of Borei Keila**

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*July XX, 2009*

H.E. Samdech Hun Sen  
Prime Minister  
Office of the Prime Minister  
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Phnom Penh, Kingdom of Cambodia

H.E. Mam Bunheng  
Minister of Health  
No 151-153 Kampuchea Krom Boulevard  
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Your Excellencies,

The Royal Government of Cambodia has won international recognition for its efforts to provide prevention, treatment, care and support for people living with HIV. However, we the under-signed individuals and organizations write to you now to express our deep concern about the discriminatory and potentially life-threatening treatment of HIV-affected families from the community of Borei Keila in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

On June 18, 2009, 20 HIV-affected families were evicted from Borei Keila and sent to Tuol Sambo, a remote resettlement site created by the government on the outskirts of the city. This eviction took place despite repeated appeals to the government, including from United Nations agencies, more than 18 local and international organizations, and a national network of people affected by HIV.

We have reason to fear that relocations of HIV-affected families are continuing even as we sign this letter.

We are deeply disturbed by the Cambodian authorities' creation of a *de facto* AIDS colony at Tuol Sambo. Located in a desolate, flood-prone field in a semi-rural area 25 kilometers from Phnom Penh, Tuol Sambo is far away -from the jobs, medical facilities, and support services that had been available to Borei Keila residents in the city.

The housing conditions at Tuol Sambo are grossly inadequate in terms of size, fire safety, and sanitation. Residents are crowded into poorly ventilated metal sheds that are baking hot in the daytime. There are no kitchens and no running water in the sheds, which are flanked by open sewers, and only one public well to service the evicted families. According to Medecins Sans Frontieres, these conditions do not meet international minimum standards for temporary emergency housing.

While other homeless people from Phnom Penh are slated for relocation to brick houses at an adjacent site at Tuol Sambo, the HIV-affected families from Borei Keila have been placed in a separate settlement with inferior housing, distinguished by green corrugated metal roofing and walls. Even before the evictees were resettled there, local people referred to the green sheds as "the AIDS village."

The Borei Keila evictions were carried out to make way for a commercial development, which was granted government approval in 2003 with the understanding that the developer would build new housing on site for residents displaced by the project.

With a few exceptions, the HIV-affected families thus far displaced by the development have not been screened for eligibility for the on-site housing – unlike other families who are not affected by HIV. After waiting for two years, the authorities have now acknowledged that at least 11 HIV-affected families previously slated to be sent to Tuol Sambo are in fact eligible for new on-site housing at Borei Keila. To date, however, the 11 families remain in their old homes at Borei Keila and have not yet been provided new housing.

For the other families evicted to Tuol Sambo, the Ministry of Health has reportedly given assurances that antiretroviral (ARV) medication and opportunistic infection treatment will be available to them. It is not clear, however, that the ministry has a sound long-term plan to ensure this. Since the eviction, the government has not directly provided services but has relied instead on nongovernmental organizations to ensure continued access to medicines, for example by paying transportation costs for the evictees to come to hospitals in the city.

In addition, there has been no consideration of the impact on health of the poor living conditions at Tuol Sambo and the lack of income-generating opportunities there. The living conditions at Tuol Sambo pose serious health risks, particularly to people with compromised immune systems. The risk to those people living with HIV can be life threatening. Residents report that the heat in the poorly ventilated metal sheds is so intense that they are usually unable to remain in their rooms during the afternoon and they are afraid that their ARV medication will deteriorate in the heat.

We take this opportunity to state our opposition to the segregation or isolation of people living with HIV, as such policies promote stigmatization and further discrimination and may seriously jeopardize their access to necessary prevention, care, treatment, and support services.

Furthermore, we recognize that people living with HIV need more than just medicines to survive. They need a continuum of care that addresses the psychological, legal, social, and economic consequences of living with HIV, and assures adequate shelter, nutrition, income generation, and access to education and other essential services.

In light of the above, we request the Royal Cambodian Government to:

- Cease moving HIV-affected families to the Tuol Sambo relocation site;
- Improve conditions at Tuol Sambo site so that they meet minimum standards for adequate shelter, sanitation, and clean water;
- Ensure full access to quality medical services, including antiretroviral treatment, treatment of opportunistic infections, as well as primary health care and home-based care;
- Work with relevant agencies and consult with the families already at Tuol Sambo to address immediate and long-term concerns regarding housing, health, safety, employment, and reintegration into society in a manner that protects their rights and livelihoods;
- Employ a transparent and fair screening process to determine eligibility for on-site housing at Borei Keila, and grant eligible families the housing immediately (including the 11 HIV-affected families already approved by the authorities); for those found ineligible, authorities should provide other adequate housing.

Thank you for your consideration.  
Yours sincerely,

[names of orgs.]

Cc:

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President, Cambodian Red Cross

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Director, NCHADS

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