Opening Remarks by

**H.E. KEO Sothie**, Vice President of Cambodian Human Rights Committee

at the Review of Cambodia

in the 46th Session of the Universal Periodic Review Working Group Meeting

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Mr. President

Members of the Troika

Honorable members of the UN

Members of Civil Society,

It is my distinct honor and privilege to address you at the onset of Cambodia’s 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review and provide some answers to advance questions we had received. I wish to begin by extending my appreciation and commend the UPR secretariat and the troika members for their exemplary support and arrangement in today’s review. I am joined today by my fellow members of the Cambodian delegation, representing national line ministries and institution.

Cambodia is determined to demonstrate our commitment in cooperating with the United Nations and international mechanisms. It is well documented that Cambodia has established close and constructive collaboration with various United Nations human rights mechanisms. Cambodia is the first country in Asia to host the country office for the OHCHR since 1993. The 12th renewal of the MoU between the Royal Government and OHCHR signifies the State’s dedication in advancing the respect for fundamental freedoms and the promotion and protection of human rights. We are proud of our commitment and active participation to international human rights rules and mechanisms. Cambodia is a state party to eight of the nine core international UN convention of human rights treaties without reservation and is also one of the few states in the Asia Pacific region that has delivered unfettered access, engaged with, and continuously extended the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia. Early this year, Cambodia engaged in constructive dialogue with the Committee on Enforced Disappearances. Last year, the UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity was granted access to visit the country and assess the implementation of existing national and international human rights standards to combat violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Cambodia has a long track record of engaging in human rights diplomacy through dialogue and cooperation and Cambodia continues high-level engagement with each cycle of the UPR with openness, candor, and respect. Cambodia’s participation in the past three UPR cycles have contributed to strengthening existing national human rights protection systems, broadening the civil-political space and invigorating socio-economic rights. Some notable policies and measures that have resulted from accepted recommendations from our previous third cycle involve the advancement for the wellbeing of people to build an inclusive and cohesive society. This includes the successful final draft law on the establishment of the National Human Rights Institution, which has been expressed by several member states during the last review. On this note, we would like to extend our appreciation to the cooperation and technical support of the OHCHR and Asia Pacific Forum, along with inputs received from relevant CSOs during the 32 national, regional and international consultations, ensuring the draft law reflects the Paris Principles.

Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

To advocate that there exists a universal panacea for all political, economic and social ills, a one-size-fits-all solution, for all countries is impractical. Democracy and human rights values are country specific. Cambodia applies these values with consideration for history, culture, and its development stage, in order to ensure tangible outcomes.

Our approach to advance democracy and the promotion and protection of human rights must, therefore, reflect on our past tragedy. Cambodia was once a war-torn country, submerged in the ruins of the Khmer Rouge genocide that resulted in the total collapse of institutions and the loss of nearly two million people which included backbone intellectuals of the country. Simply put, Cambodia went back to Year Zero. Although marred by internal conflict and bombarded by chaos, Cambodia has successfully emerged as a peaceful and independent sovereign state respecting the rule of law and achieving political stability, and securing dynamic growth and economic, social, and cultural development.

One of Cambodia’s first step towards peace and reconciliation as a post-conflict country was to seek justice and punish the most senior and responsible leaders of the Khmer Rouge. To put this into context of how significant of an achievement this is, only a few international criminal convictions in the world have been against heads of states. Through the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), a hybrid tribunal established between the Royal Government and with great assistance from the United Nations, NUON Chea and KHIEU Samphan, who are among the highest levels of Khmer Rouge leaders were convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Cambodia has chosen not to cower, forget, or ignore past crimes that were committed, but face head on with its genocidal past. In addition to adherence to international criminal law jurisprudence, Cambodia made immense contribution to both global and domestic efforts to combat impunity for mass atrocity crimes. It has strengthened respect for the rule of law in Cambodia and helped heal wounds of the past, allowing the people of this country to look to the future. As decided by the Royal Government and approved by the UN General Assembly, the ECCC has entered into its residual stage with a focus on archiving to preserve and promote the Court’s legacy, dissemination of information, and especially support projects for victims.

Cambodia is now fully integrated into regional and global structures that unshackle millions of Cambodians from sheer poverty to enjoy decent livelihoods and significantly increased life expectancy through the Win-Win policy of **Samdech Techo HUN Sen**, the former Prime Minister of Cambodia. The convergence of concentrated efforts to promote and protect human rights can be seen by prioritizing human capital development through social protection and assistance expansion, support for emergency response, and enhancing welfare holistically within the Pentagonal Strategy-Phase I of **Samdech Moha Bovor Thipadei HUN Manet**.

Achieving fundamental human rights that every citizen is entitled to was and remains today the first and foremost important task for the government. As we place the utmost importance on peace, to be ardently cherished and protected, we recognize that peace is an enabling right, an imperative precondition foundation for the enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and the realization of sustainable development. As human rights are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, we must tread carefully and emphasize attentively the delicate balance of the two groups of fundamental rights.

Through peace and political stability, Cambodia’s economy has been among the fastest growing economies, unmatched by any other post-conflict society. Cambodia’s annual growth averaged 7 percent between 2009 and 2019. Poverty rates nearly halved from 33.8 percent in 2009 to 16.6 percent in 2022. Moreover, despite the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia’s economic growth is projected to be 5.8 percent in 2024 and 6 percent in 2025. Consequently, Cambodia transitioned to lower-middle-income status as set out by the World Bank Group in 2016 and is set to achieve an upper-middle income status by 2030 and high-income status by 2050. We are encouraged by a national review showing that most of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals – along with our 18th goal of mine clearance – are on track, despite global economic uncertainties.

Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

While Cambodia is mindful of our shortcomings, the nation strives forward to reduce poverty, vulnerability, and inequality while boosting human development and economic growth to ensure our society becomes more inclusive, cohesive, and resilient. Cambodia has implemented wide-ranging social assistance schemes. The strengthening of protection in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and other shocks, post-pandemic economic recovery, diverse social protection initiatives, including the launching of the National Social Assistance Fund, for impoverished households and vulnerable groups are worth commending. Cambodia’s social security system that was enhanced during the COVID-19 pandemic has now been integrated into Cambodians’ Family Package to become regular national social assistance programs that supports vulnerable populations from conception until death. This holistic social security system aims to reduce maternal and infant mortality, prevent malnutrition, improve access to primary and secondary education, enhance technical and vocational education and training with stipends, and further expand health coverage to at-risk population including women, young children, elderly people, people with disabilities and people living with HIV/AIDs. The development of Cambodia’s social protection system has prominently improved, covering 42.1 percent of the population as of 2024.

Cambodia has expanded the coverage of our Health Equity Fund to at-risk households on top of poor households and launched a voluntary based Social Health Protection scheme for Dependents of National Social Security Fund members and self-employed people in the informal economy, with the aim of moving toward Universal Health Coverage. With this, Cambodia has developed a Roadmap toward Universal Health Coverage 2024-2035 with clear key interventions and reforms which will guide our path to achieve this vision.

In the plight to advance gender equality and empower women socially and economically, Cambodia has achieved significant progress. Policies include investing in gender equality, promoting women's leadership and entrepreneurship, ensuring health and education, combating trafficking and violence, and fostering climate resilience. Pursuing these goals aligns with the government's aim to eliminate violence against women and enhance gender equality across all sectors. The government has implemented key priorities set out in the Third National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against Women and the Neary Rattanak V Strategic Plan, emphasizing investment in gender equality, women's rights protection, accountability mechanisms, and economic empowerment. The continuation of the work is further reflected in the recently launched Neary Rattanak VI Strategic Plan in early 2024.

Regarding indigenous communities, there exists over 60 ethnic groups in Cambodia. National efforts to support indigenous rights include issuing self-identification certificates and developing internal regulations for land use. The Royal Government remains committed to address pending land disputes, provide social land concession, and provide incentives to the development of affordable housing. Development programs have been correlated to improve infrastructure and access to education, including multilingual education services and scholarships, fostering cultural preservation and socio-economic progress.

On digital technology, Cambodia recognizes its transformative power that can be positively harnessed for sustainable development. The Royal Government has adopted core policies to guide its digital transformation journey. On digital infrastructure, Cambodia is expanding connectivity that will allow for internet access to every commune by 2027. Our mobile penetration rate is currently 122.26%. We recognize that digital infrastructure must be adequate enabling access for all, especially the rural population, so that all are empowered with access to knowledge and information, leaving no one behind. On human capital, Cambodia currently has an abundance of youths with more than 60% below 35 years old and an increasingly tech-savvy population. As outlined by the Digital Skills Development Roadmap 2023-2035: Cambodia aims to produce 100,000 digital talents in 10 years. The Royal Government offers thousands of digital scholarships and loans to our people and training to civil servants to increase our digital human resources. The government itself is also transforming itself into a digital government that will better serve its people by providing public services in a more efficient and effective manner, utilizing emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. Last, among the many policies and laws that Cambodia is preparing, it has also finished drafting a comprehensive personal data protection law that will help secure our population’s right to privacy and data protection.

Cambodia continues to find the right balance between individual freedom and liberty on the one hand and the interests of the collective society on the other. Debates take place on a wide range of issues both online and offline. Freedom of the press and expression are guaranteed by laws and regulations aligned with the Constitution, fostering an environment where media outlets and journalists are encouraged to collaborate closely with relevant authorities while enhancing their professional skills and understanding of their rights and responsibilities. The vibrant presence of more than 2,000 traditional and digital media outlets, including critical ones, have been operating without censorship in the Kingdom.

Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are proud that Cambodia’s Constitution is among the few if not the only Constitution that explicitly enshrines the UN Charter and human rights instruments. Article 31 states that, “the Kingdom of Cambodia shall recognize and respect human rights as stipulated in the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human rights, the covenants and conventions related to human rights, women’s and children’s rights.”

We must also acknowledge that human rights are aspirational core values to be achieved through a peer learning process that cannot be divorced from national characteristics and local contexts. Cambodia takes a whole-of-society approach, oftentimes making difficult policy decisions to maintain our hard-earned peace and stability while balancing competing rights.

We respect and adhere to the UPR process as an intergovernmental discourse, state driven, and action-oriented process. It must be, therefore, exercised in an objective, transparent, constructive, and cooperative manner. As a small post-conflict and emerging country, Cambodia attaches great importance to a genuine dialogue-based method that is non-confrontational, non-politicized, and non-selective. We are optimistic that assessments will be conducted in a fair and balanced manner abstaining from any preconceived prejudices and prejudgment. With this in mind, Cambodia remains resolute in our engagement with member states in the forthcoming exchanges during this fourth cycle of the review to further promote and protect human rights.

Thank you!