



Resettlement of the Squatters from Angkor Park

Amnesty International
Lies and Deceives Global Public Opinion

Raoul M. JENNAR

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Bakong Temple
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Baphou Temple
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People working at one of the worksites during the Democratic Kampuchea regime, circa. 1975-1978
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Useful reminder

Westerners who observe, criticize and judge Cambodia and Cambodians ignore or pretend to ignore where this country comes from, where these people come from. Forty-five years ago, this country had been “taken back to the Stone Age,” as the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General declared in 1993.

Having been brought back in 1979 to the Stone Age, this meant not only the massive destruction of all facilities, but above all the massive destruction of Cambodians and, in particular, urban citizen, the most educated majority of the population. With as result, a population of survivors hungry, exhausted, and completely disintegrated after four years of terror and infinite suffering. A people embargoed then for twelve years and deprived of the most essential fundamental rights to food, health, education, culture, development. In complete silence from Amnesty International...

A people of survivors to whom, for another 19 years, were inflicted all the suffering of a war imposed by those who wanted to put an end to the regime resulting from the liberation in 1979 of the Pol Pot's regime. Because Cambodia is not at peace following the 1991 Paris Agreements. It is at peace thanks to the pacification achieved only at the end of 1998 by the then Prime Minister, Mr. Hun Sen. Barely 25 years ago.



People working on an irrigation project. Dam "January 1st", Chinith river, Kampong Thom province, 1976
© Documentation Center of Cambodia Archives

All this has led to profound consequences that are ignored or pretended to be ignored by those who demand that the most perfect model of Western democracy be applied in this country which historically has never known democracy. The main consequence is found in the behavior of Cambodians. Nine years of massive bombings followed by four years of a genocidal regime have imprinted behaviors that amount to “every man for himself”. If the strict hierarchy of society has been perpetuated and if family solidarity, typically Asian, has survived, however, the Cambodian, in its vast majority, behaves as if he is alone in the world and could only count on himself. He does not feel like a member of the social fabric whose rules he must respect. And, a classic process observed among survivors of similar tragedies, the trauma of the survivors was carried over to their descendants. These behaviors are reflected in all acts of life in society. We observe this, in particular and spectacularly, in the total lack of respect for road traffic rules. But it is not only on the road that we reject respect for the rules. Failure to comply with the law is a common practice at all levels of society. It makes precarious the difficult balance between respect for the general interest and individual freedoms.

This is where we must find the origin of the problems faced by the Cambodian authorities in the management of the Angkor Park since it was listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

The study which follows aims to re-establish the facts after they have been manipulated or concealed by those who speak of “cruel mass evictions” and “forced expulsion”, notably in Amnesty International, 14 November 2023 report, recklessly but widely quoted by the international media and opponents of the Cambodian authorities. The facts recalled below are not likely to be disputed, because they are incontestable and verifiable. Amnesty International lies, intentionally or by omission.

This NGO, which does not live up to its reputation for neutrality, has falsified certain facts and passed over other very important ones in silence. This is what we are going to demonstrate.

Chapter 1

The constraints of UNESCO World Heritage listing

Cambodia has been a member of UNESCO since 1951. It was on 28 November 1991, that it acceded to the UNESCO International Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage adopted in 1972. Article 4 of this Convention specifies that:

“Each State Party to this Convention recognizes that the duty of ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, presentation, and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage referred to in Articles 1 and 2 and situated on its territory, belongs primarily to that State. It will do all it can to this end, to the utmost of its own resources and, where appropriate, with any international assistance and co-operation financial, artistic, scientific and technical, which it may be able to obtain.”¹

It is the primary responsibility of the Cambodian government to ensure the protection, conservation, development, and transmission to future generations of a World Heritage site. The role of UNESCO is to make that its “recommendations” are respected.

The Angkor site was included on the UNESCO World Heritage list on 14 December 1992, when peace did not yet reign in the country, when it was placed under the United Nations Provisional Authority and when Pol Pot’s troops were operating militarily near the site. What motivates those who initiated this inscription is the desire, in the face of such dangers, to protect at all costs the triple monumental, human and forestry heritage that this site represents. These perils justified that the Angkor site was for the next ten years also included on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

Triple heritage

The park of temples built around the city of Angkor is famous throughout the world. No one is unaware of the exceptional philosophical testimony of these temples dedicated to the deities of Brahmanism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. No one is unaware of its exceptional architectural wealth. This is the incomparable value of a grandiose monumental heritage bequeathed by those who made the Khmer empire great from the 9th to the 14th century.

¹ UNESCO, Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 16 November 1972.



Angkor Thom Temple
© Hum Rithy

A portrait of an elder woman
taken in Siem Reap province
© Makara Ouch

Forest around the Gate of the Dead
inside of Angkor Thom temple
© Apsara Authority Website

However, fewer people know the human heritage found in this 401 km² park. It is populated not only by sculpted representations of human beings or divinities. Ultimate descendants of the inhabitants of a city which in the 12th century was the most populous capital in the world, the occupants of the 112 villages present in the park, perpetuate cultural practices that are very rarely found elsewhere.

Furthermore, the whole is part of a forest site which offers a natural setting whose preservation is an integral part of the safeguarding of the site because this forest environment is not separable from the architectural and cultural heritage.

This triple heritage, monumental, human and forestry, requires balanced management of a site which is, given its complexity, extremely fragile. Which explains a great joint vigilance by UNESCO and the Royal Government of Cambodia.

The requirements of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee

The site was able to be inscribed because the World Heritage Committee found that the Angkor site met at least four of the six criteria then required for such registration:

“Criterion (i): The Angkor complex represents the entire range of Khmer art from the 9th to the 14th centuries and includes a number of indisputable artistic masterpieces (e.g. Angkor Wat, the Bayon, Banteay Srei).

Criterion (ii): The influence of Khmer art as developed at Angkor was a pro-

found one over much of South-east Asia and played a fundamental role in its distinctive evolution.

Criterion (iii): The Khmer Empire of the 9th-14th centuries encompassed much of South-east Asia and played a formative role in the political and cultural development of the region. All that remains of that civilization is its rich heritage of cult structures in brick and stone.

Criterion (iv): Khmer architecture evolved largely from that of the Indian sub-continent, from which it soon became clearly distinct as it developed its own special characteristics, some independently evolved, and others acquired from neighboring cultural traditions. The result was a new artistic horizon in oriental art and architecture.”²



The 37th session of the World Heritage Committee hold in the Kingdom of Cambodia, in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap-Angkor, from 16th to 27th June 2013
© Eric Esquivel / UNESCO

To ensure the preservation of the constituent elements of the criteria which justified the inscription of a site, the World Heritage Committee imposes obligations on the States which have adhered to the 1972 Convention. Several articles in a document entitled “Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention”³ deserve attention if we want to take an objective look at the problem that motivates this brochure.

First, Article 24 describes the functions of the World Heritage Center which constitutes the Secretariat of the World Heritage Committee. It acts in cooperation with the State concerned to, in particular:

² UNESCO, <https://World Heritage Committee.unesco.org/fr/list/667/>

³ UNESCO, Intergovernmental committee for the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, World Heritage Center, Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, last version, 2021

- a) identify, on the basis of Tentative Lists and nominations submitted by States Parties, cultural and natural properties of Outstanding Universal Value which are to be protected under the Convention and to inscribe those properties on the World Heritage List;
- b) examine the state of conservation of properties inscribed on the World Heritage List through processes of Reactive Monitoring (see Chapter IV) and Periodic Reporting (see Chapter V);
- c) decide which properties inscribed on the World Heritage List are to be inscribed on, or removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger;
- d) decide whether a property should be deleted from the World Heritage List (see Chapter IV);
- e) define the procedure by which requests for International Assistance are to be considered and carry out studies and consultations as necessary before coming to a decision (see Chapter VII) (...).

Two other articles in the same document specify the information that the World Heritage Committee is entitled to request from Cambodia:

Art. 172. The World Heritage Committee invites the States Parties to the Convention to inform the Committee, through the Secretariat, of their intention to undertake or to authorize in an area protected under the Convention major restorations or new constructions which may affect the Outstanding Universal Value of the property. Notice should be given as soon as possible (for instance, before drafting basic documents for specific projects) and before making any decisions that would be difficult to reverse, so that the Committee may assist in seeking appropriate solutions to ensure that the Outstanding Universal Value of the property is fully preserved.

Art. 173. The World Heritage Committee requests that reports of missions to review the state of conservation of the World Heritage properties include:

- a) an indication of threats or significant improvement in the conservation of the property since the last report to the World Heritage Committee;
- b) any follow-up to previous decisions of the World Heritage Committee on the state of conservation of the property;
- c) information on any threat or damage to or loss of Outstanding Universal Value, integrity and/or authenticity for which the property was inscribed on the World Heritage List.

Warnings, from 1992

As early as 1992, a month before the site was inscribed on the World Heritage List, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) was concerned:

“One of the most serious potential threats to the Angkor monuments is the probability that, once the political problems have been resolved, tourism will become a major source of revenue for Cambodia. **The impact of increased tourist facilities (hotels, restaurants, shops, an extended airport, car parks, etc.) around the monuments could be catastrophic) if they are allowed to encroach too closely.** This factor must be given the highest priority in defining eventual buffer zones and the constraints that apply within them, so as to avoid irreparable damage to the setting of the monuments. It is further recommended that final inscription be completed once the Committee has been satisfied on the following points:

- 1) A comprehensive and effective monuments law is in force in Cambodia. World Heritage Committee properly staffed and resourced. and is carrying out its work competently.
- 3) The boundaries of the World Heritage Site are reconsidered in the light of the results of the UNDP Zoning and Environmental Management project.**
- 4) Meaningful buffer zones which can be effectively managed are defined.**
- 5) An effective mechanism has been set up to monitor and coordinate existing and projected international conservation and exploration projects in the Angkor area.”⁴



Tourists of different nationalities watching sunrise at Angkor Wat
© Apsara Authority Website

⁴International Council on Monuments and Sites, ICOMOS, 16 novembre 1992.

The World Heritage Committee confirmed later:

“The integrity of the site is under two pressures:

1.endogenous: exerted by around 100,000 inhabitants distributed over 112 historic settlements scattered over the site, who constantly try to expand their dwelling areas;

2.exogenous: related to the proximity of the town of Siem Reap, the seat of the province and a tourism hub”⁵

As early as 1992, the UNESCO authorities predicted that the completely exceptional character of the Angkor site would arouse such attraction that a double demographic pressure would be exerted on the site: that of tourists and that of those – inhabitants of the province, but also investors, big or small, in the tourism sector – who want to profit from this influx of tourists.

This concern is clearly not shared by Amnesty International.



Above: Trapeang Ses, a pond in front of Angkor Wat temple taken in October 30, 2021 © Apsara Authority Website
Below: Tourists visiting Angkor Wat temple during daytime © Agence Kamphuchea Press (AKP)

⁵ UNESCO, <https://World Heritage Committee.unesco.org/en/list/668/>

Chapter 2

Implementation of registration constraints

When registering the site, the World Heritage Committee took on board the recommendations of ICOMOS and asked Cambodia to proceed without delay with the adoption of adequate protection legislation and the establishment of a national agency protection staffed by appropriate personnel, the establishment of permanent boundaries of the site based on a project presented by UNDP and the definition of significant buffer zones. The new Cambodian Government resulting from the 1993 elections devoted, with technical assistance from UN-ESCO, the first years of its mandate to implementing the recommendations of the World Heritage Committee made during the inscription of the site. On the international level, a support structure was created to ensure, in cooperation with the Cambodian authorities, the coordination and monitoring of international actions undertaken to preserve the site, conserve its monuments and protect its environment.

The Royal Decree of 28 May 1994

This is the foundation legal text. It is of capital importance. It divides the Siem Reap/Angkor region into 5 zones, each with their own details of implementation:

Zone 1: the site of the monuments; this is the archaeological site deserving the highest degree of protection; this area includes the most famous monuments and their immediate surroundings. Only “development essential to the protection and development of the site” is authorized. The creation of new villages is completely prohibited in this area as well as the resettlement of residents. This status is also attributed to the Banteay Srei site and the Roluos group.

Zone 2: the site of the protected archaeological reserves is considered both as an area rich in remains and as a buffer zone. Only “development essential to the conservation of local ways of life” is authorized. It is prohibited to extend inhabited spaces while allowing the development of existing properties.

Zone 3: concerns protected cultural landscapes and more particularly rivers.

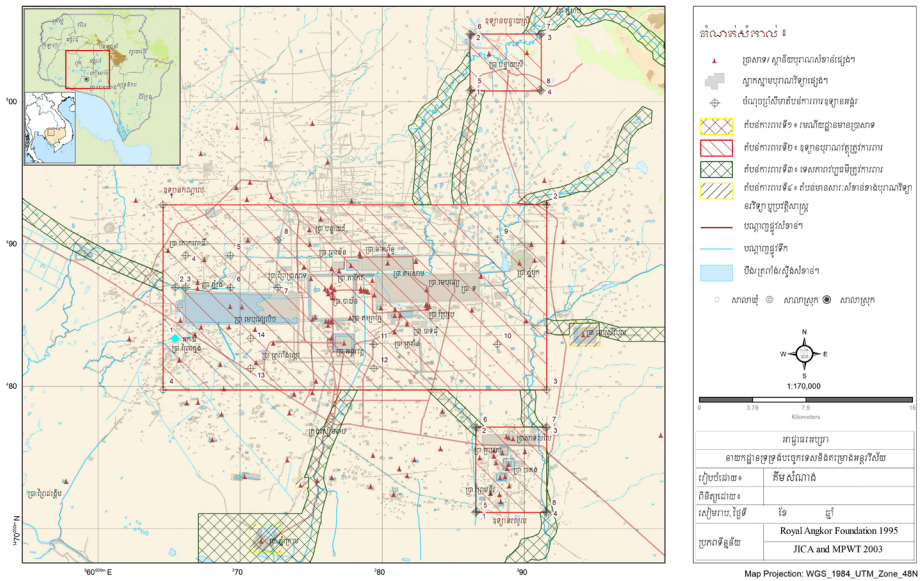
Zone 4: is made up of points of archaeological, anthropological or historical interest.

Zone 5: designates the socio-economic and cultural development perimeter of the Siem Reap region.

Zones 1 and 2: form a whole of more than 400 km². This is the protected zone of Angkor Park. It belongs to the inalienable public domain of the State. If, in these two zones, local residents are allowed to carry out “controlled development linked to their traditional way of life and to a reasonable development of tourism”, the introduction of new residents and any developments, installations and activities unrelated to the traditional way of life are clearly excluded. A Decree of 16 September 2004 will specify that “citizens who resided in these areas before the proclamation of the Royal Decree of 28 May 1994 are authorized to maintain their domicile there without being forced to leave their residence”.

The Royal Decree of 1994 also deals with the rules and guidelines for the protection and sustainable management of landscapes and forests.

ដែនដីកំណត់តំបន់ជំនាញការចាត់ចែង(តំបន់ស្រុកប្រជាជន-អង្គរ)



The Authority for the Protection of the Site and Development of the Angkor Region (APSARA)

Created by the Royal Decree of 19 February 1995, APSARA is the national protection agency required by the World Heritage Committee. It is legally and administratively competent to apply the Royal Decree of 28 May 1994. The establishment of official public buildings located in zones 1 and 2 requires authorization not from APSARA, but from the Government.



Apsara Authority Office
© Apsara Authority Website

The law on the protection of cultural heritage

Following an insistent request from the World Heritage Committee during its 1995 meeting, this law was finally adopted by the National Assembly and promulgated on 25 January 1996.

The creation of the INTERNATIONAL COORDINATING COMMITTEE (ICC)

On the international level, an intergovernmental “Conference on the safeguarding and development of the historic site of Angkor,” organized at the initiative of the French and Japanese governments, was held in Tokyo on 12 and 13 October 1993. Among other the decisions taken, the International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor was established on 13 October 1993. Under the joint chairmanship of France and Japan, it coordinates successive scientific, restoration and conservation projects carried out by the Royal Government of Cambodia, by APSARA and by international partners. It ensures the consistency of the various projects and defines, when necessary, technical, and financial standards. It meets every year, and its Technical Committee can hold several annual sessions depending on needs.

As early as 1996, the International Coordinating Committee expressed its concern about construction projects for several hotels which and which, if approved, would contravene the zoning regulations adopted by the Government.

The inscription of a site as exceptional as that of Angkor implies real and proportional constraints intended to protect this site from the various pressures that may be exerted. Everyone can realize this.

Except, obviously, Amnesty International.



The 38th Technical session of ICC Angkor
© Apsara Authority

Chapter 3

The disastrous effects of success

The pacification of the country, which became real at the end of 1998, is at the origin of considerable changes in the life of Cambodia and Cambodians. Peace finally achieved, tourists and investors arrived in increasing numbers every year from 1999.

Exponential growth in tourist numbers

The attraction of an exceptional site causes exceptional growth in tourists. The total number of foreign tourists visiting Cambodia increased from 176,617 in 1994 to 1,055,202 ten years later.⁶

1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
176,617	219,680	260,489	218,843	286,524	367,743

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
466,365	604,919	786,524	701,014	1,055,202



Crowded of tourists in front of Angkor Wat temple
© Apsara Authority

⁶Source: Ministry of Tourism.

If not all tourists go to the Angkor Park, it is nevertheless overwhelmingly the main destination. From 2006 to 2008, the number of foreign tourists increased by 43%. The figure of one million foreign visitors to the site was reached for the first time in 2008 (Cambodians have free access and are therefore not registered). This growth, as the director of the World Heritage Center observes, “*is taking forms specific and unique*”.⁷

From 2004 to 2014, in ten years, the number of foreign visitors visiting the Angkor Park doubled from 1,055,202 to 2,059,702. From 2014 to 2018, the number of visitors consistently exceeded two million with the highest number to date of 2,590,815 at the end of 2018.⁸

It goes without saying that the daily presence of thousands of tourists is not without consequences for the preservation of monuments. But we will limit ourselves, as part of this response to Amnesty International’s accusations, to the consequences of this influx of tourists on the “human heritage” and “natural heritage” aspects of the protection of the site.

The squatting

Everyone can understand that the growing presence of tourists and in particular foreign tourists reputed – rightly or wrongly – to be wealthy, represents a form of relief for a Cambodian population whose standard of living remains, to a large extent, very weak. Therefore, the Angkor Park has a strong appeal for those who hope to find an activity linked to tourism, for example small catering or the sale of various objects, possibly combined with an agriculture activity. This means firstly forgetting that the site remains a historic space. It then means forgetting the sacred spirit of the place. Finally, we forget that temples are not places of eating, drinking or shopping. We cannot imagine being able to picnic in the cathedral of Reims or in the palace and park of Versailles, any more than in the sanctuaries and temples of Nikko or on the Acropolis of Athens.

The inhabitants of the site (and their descendants) present at the time of its registration are recognized by the Royal Decree as legally occupying their place of residence. APSARA always recognized that the legal residents are one of the components that helped Angkor earn its world heritage statue. Together with all shareholders, APSARA has been implementing many development projects to improve people’s livelihoods and well-being by providing them with capacity building in agriculture, encouraging them to embrace cultural practices, preserving various pagodas on the site, building bridges and roads, and building schools and health centers. In addition, they also allow the old residents to fix, polish, and build new houses that meet the standard.

But this is not the case for those who have settled after the publication of the

⁷ UNESCO, International Coordinating Committee, 12th plenary session, 28 et 29 November 2005 meetings, p. 48-51.

⁸ Sources: APSARA National Authority and Angkor Enterprise, December 2028.

Royal Decree and its implementation⁹. The latter are considered squatters, that is to say according to UNESCO, illegal occupants.

The illegal arrival of many new permanent residents on the protected site has led inexorably to illegal activities which alter the site: new constructions, erection of fences, deforestation, extension of cultivated areas, uncontrolled installation of shops and restaurants. These activities occur gradually, like a slow nibbling of spaces. Often, they are carried out at night, proof of the squatters' knowledge of their illegal nature.

The surface area of the villages increased from 112 ha in 1964 to 143 ha in 1999 and 185 ha in 2004. That is an increase of 62.28%, whereas this area should not have increased at all since 1994.¹⁰ The population of these villages increased from 68,000 people in 1998 to 98,857 in 2005, an increase of 30,857 people in 7 years!



Old houses inside of Angkor Archaeological Site
© Agence Kamphuchea Press (AKP)

⁹ We had to wait for a population census to have a basis for designating new arrivals and conferring on them the status of illegal residents. This was clarified only in 2004 (see below).

¹⁰ Report to the International Coordinating Committee by L. CHABASON, legal expert appointed by the Director General of UNESCO to report on the then prevailing situation of protected areas and to develop appropriate recommendations, 2005.

The increase in population and the multiplication of illegal commercial activities have had major consequences on the evolution of the protected site. According to a study conducted by APSARA, this development has taken on very worrying proportions.

In the Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom sectors, the area of dense forest (i.e. jungle) decreased from 360 ha in 1964 to 63 ha in 1999 then to 17 ha in 2004. This which means a 95% reduction. The other wooded areas of the site decreased from 1029 ha in 1964 to 365 ha in 1999 and to 353 ha in 2004. A reduction of 65.7%. According to APSARA, at the current rate, the forest cover could have disappeared in this part of the site in the coming years. Because of agriculture, logging, the use of wood for heating, fires and urbanization, Angkor's reputation as a "Temple Forest" is fast disappearing. According to APSARA, **"Angkor is losing its natural heritage, its environment is being destroyed and its cultural identity is in danger."**¹¹

All these abuses which are the work of the squatters, their refusal to respect the rules which govern human presence on this exceptional site are, of course, ignored and passed over in silence by Amnesty International.



Bakel Chamkrong, a temple dedicated to Shiva
© Apsara Authority

¹¹ ASARA report quoted in the L. CHABASON Report p.11.

Chapter 4

Put an end to “anarchic activities”

The Prime Minister of Cambodia was concerned about the multiple form of damage caused by the illegal occupants in the protected areas of the Angkor Park. A first “governmental circular on the cessation of anarchic activities in the Angkor Archaeological Park” was published on 6 May 2003.

Following an International Coordinating Committee meeting in February 2004 in Siem Reap, the World Heritage Committee noted that peace had been restored to Cambodia and that the site had been completely demined. Taking into account the improvement in the physical state of the monuments located on the site, as well as the measures adopted to strengthen the management and monitoring system of the site on the part of the APSARA National Authority, the World Heritage Committee decided to remove the Angkor site from the List of World Heritage in Danger. Nevertheless, it strongly recommended ensuring the balance between the protection of monumental heritage and the controlled development of human heritage.

On 24 June 2004, “Order of the Royal Government of Cambodia No. 02/BB on the cessation and eradication of anarchic activities in the Angkor Archaeological Park” was published, adopted on the previous day. Acts of lawlessness targeted include illegal logging and land clearing, setting fires, digging up land, encroaching on land, building houses with permanent foundations, constructions of all kinds without the certificate of the APSARA Authority. The order states that:

“Now, the Royal Government of Cambodia, UNESCO and international communities must work together to ensure that conservation efforts in the Angkor Archaeological Park are in line with the goal of sustainable development, with the aim of supporting the tourism industry, which is the fundamental basis of the economy, the development of society and the reduction of poverty. According to the ordinance, Zone 1 is considered an “archaeological site with temples,” while Zone 2 is an “archaeological site with ancient status to be protected.”

The order listed several key decisions. The point related to construction indicates that:

“The APSARA Authority is the only entity enjoying the exclusive right to issue any construction certificate in the Angkor Archaeological Park. Constructions already built illegally must be demolished without excep-

tion within 45 days following the execution order.”

Five months after the order given in June, the Government recalled the land use planning standards in zones 1 and 2 of the Angkor site:

1. Citizens who have lived in these protected zones 1 and 2 for a long time are allowed to maintain their domicile in it without being forced to leave their residence.
2. Citizens are allowed to renovate their domicile or restore their dwelling if it has become damaged or to build a new house to replace the old one provided that they obtain permission from the APSARA Authority.
3. Citizens are entitled to administer and dispose of their lands, that is to say they can bequeath them by estate to their heirs or transfer them to other family members or sell them to other members of the village community in order to deal with difficulties in life. However, according to the law, it is not allowed to sell their land to companies or individuals for commercial purposes such as hotels, restaurants, karaoke bars, etc.¹²

As stated, while residents can renovate their home if it is damaged or, with the authorization of APSARA, build a new house to replace the old one, any construction of a new home is prohibited. This was recalled shortly after the publication of Government Decision No. 70 of 16 November 2004, during a meeting organized by APSARA in Siem Reap where all village and commune chiefs concerned were summoned to remind them of the obligations created by the Royal Decree of 1994 and provide them with the details of the Decision of 16 November 2004. It was recalled that the cooperation of local authorities is a decisive factor in ensuring compliance with the rules. This essential information work was followed by visits by APSARA representatives to each village. Following Government Decision No. 70 of 16 November 2004, Prime Minister Hun Sen will explain its content through a number of speeches indicating a real information effort.

That the Government published three legal documents (3/5/2003; 24/6/2004; 16/11/2004) in 19 months relating to violations of the Royal Decree of 1994 reflects the extent of the abuses to which the inhabitants of the site engaged.

The Government was, however, aware of the continuing growth in the size of families and the appearance of new households. It therefore proposed to offer access to a new development zone to households of new generations who agree to settle outside the Angkor Park.

APSARA, following a government decision, acquired a 500 ha site which could be extended to 1012 hectares to the east of the protection zone, in the com-

¹² Article 2 of Government Decision No. 70 SSR of 16 November 2004 on the standard classification of land uses in zones 1 and 2 of the Siem Reap-Angkor Archaeological Park.

muné of Run Ta-Ek, in the district of Banteay Srei. APSARA developed the concept of an “eco-village”. It was project to be built on this site to accommodate 850 families, or approximately 3.400 people¹³ living in protected zones 1 and 2 who wish to enlarge their homes. Each family will have one hectare and a house. This project received financial and technical support from New Zealand, whose policy of great respect for local communities is known.

APSARA ordered a census of the population living in zone 1 and 2 and established a system for managing permit applications (construction, renovation, extension). Three information brochures (for construction, for extension, for modifications) were published. Any modification to the habitat required a prior permit application, stipulating the characteristics of a traditional Khmer house that must be respected and on the types of fences or hedges that may be made in a protected area. A free consultation service was made available to those concerned.

A reforestation plan covering an area of 1,885 hectares with a first stage of 540 ha was developed by APSARA.

To inform the population, great efforts are being made by APSARA:

- Markers have been put in place by APSARA to clearly indicate the boundaries of Zones 1 and 2.
- Billboards have been posted to show the zone boundaries and outline the rights of the people regarding their residences in zones 1 and 2.
- Means of communication with the communities have been set up. Eleven letterboxes were set up in five districts and feedback is regularly being received and assessed by APSARA.
- Brochures have been prepared on the legislation governing management of the cultural zones.
- Two telephone lines have been installed that people can call 24 hours a day to give us any feedback they wish.
- Brochures have been prepared regarding the type of dwellings that it would be advisable to have in the zone. Even for fencing, the wish has been expressed to put in natural hedges to enhance the landscape.
- Work was done to communicate directly with village communities by training trainers. APSARA staff is trained first, then the Heritage Police Unit, the provincial police.¹⁴

To combat illegal practices on the ground, APSARA created an “Intervention Unit” responsible for intervening and stopping illegal activities in accordance with the Prime Minister’s directives of 2003 and 2004. But this effort clashed with the support provided to those in violation by local authorities. APSARA was

¹³ If we consider an average of 4 people per family.

¹⁴ UNESCO, International Coordinating Committee 12th plenary session, meeting of November 28 and 29, 2005, p.43-45.

put under pressure to withdraw the complaints it notified of offenders. The effective application of the rules set out in the Royal Decree of 1994 came up against the ill will of some of the inhabitants who were working to circumvent them.¹⁵ **Illustrating this lack of cooperation from the local population, when the boundaries of zones 1 and 2 were very visibly indicated, it sparked negative reactions: signs were sprayed and sometimes even destroyed.**

Amnesty International, of course, does not report these behaviors and offenses committed by its protégés. Nor does this NGO report the spectacular achievement of the Run Ta Ek eco-village which is gradually becoming a reality from 2010. Amnesty prefers to add to its multiple lies that “large-scale efforts by Cambodian authorities to relocate families from these areas did not take place until 2022”.



Households inside of Run Ta Ek Zone 1
© Chea Vannak

¹⁵ UNESCO, Lucien CHABASON Report to the International Coordinating Committee, 2005.

Chapter 5

The continuous recidivism

In 2005, thanks to the report presented by Lucien Chabason, a legal expert appointed by the Director General of UNESCO, the International Coordinating Committee became aware of the alarming situation in protected areas, in particular zone 2, related to ongoing developments which did not comply with existing regulations.

During the International Coordinating Committee meeting of 28 and 29 November 2005, Mr. Sok An, Deputy Prime Minister and President of APSARA, addressed what he considered to be the crucial point, that is to say the future of the Angkor Park:

“This future, as you realize, involves structuring the territory as well as the activities of the communities that have been living for a long time on this site, one which has been classified as a cultural heritage site of mankind. With an eye to the future, the concern involves seeing to it that the communities do not sacrifice heritage for their own interests, nor should they be sacrificed for the interests of heritage”¹⁶.

These comments illustrate the extreme complexity of the task to be accomplished by APSARA which, if the stones to be protected do not speak, finds itself confronted with new populations, illegally installed and some of whom are more than reluctant to respect the rules which govern the protected site.

This International Coordinating Committee meeting – most of which is usually occupied by the state of conservation of each temple and restoration projects – devoted important debates to this subject. APSARA was able to report on all the initiatives taken in 2005, following government decisions to put an end to the anarchic situation prevailing on the site. As a result of a census of the population of the two protected areas, it announced that 79,084 inhabitants live there, or 19,771 families.¹⁷ It was recognized that the indigenous population cooperates well with the authorities and fulfills the obligations provided for in the event of renovation or replacement of their house.¹⁸ The same is not true of those who have settled illegally who represent constant pressure. We can read in the recommendations submitted to the International Coordinating Committee the following: **“Squatter zones have emerged in many places, as well as the construction of high-density buildings (...). This trend is set to continue if action is not taken.”**

Difficulties with illegal occupants of the protected site continue as noted in 2008,

¹⁶ UNESCO, International Coordinating Committee, 12th plenary session, 28 and 29 November 2005 meetings, p.16.

¹⁷ Based on an average of 4 members in each family.

¹⁸ For example, between 1 August 2004 and 30 August 2005, APSARA received 378 reconstruction requests. 167 were granted and 169 refused. UNESCO, International Coordinating Committee, 12th plenary session, 28 and 29 November 2005 meetings, p.44.

when study carried out in collaboration with APSARA confirmed the concerns previously expressed. According to this study, “land use, occupation and development are not taking place according to the intentions of the legislation”, the main problem residing in “the inability in past years to limit urban development to the outer limits of zone No. 2 (buffer zone), north of Siem Reap”, caused by the extraordinary growth of tourism and population. The maps resulting from the study illustrate that a very significant and irreversible negative impact on the integrity of the property would occur unless the authorities could urgently exercise effective control over land management. The World Heritage Committee, which met in July 2008,

“- reiterates its serious concern for the continuing and increasing threats posed to the Outstanding Universal Value and integrity of the property by the ongoing uncontrolled urban expansion in the property and its buffer zones, despite the efforts made by the Cambodian authorities.

- requests the State Party to address these threats by ensuring swift and full implementation of the recommendations of the 2005 mission, and in particular to:

a) clarify, including by passing new legislation, if necessary, the rules regarding property rights, ownership and building codes applicable to zones 1 and 2;

b) enforce existing laws regarding illegal occupation, unauthorised construction and development and park-land appropriation/alienation;

c) strengthen the capacities of APSARA to enable effective land use planning and management, including by providing it with the necessary resources.”¹⁹

In 2010, the World Heritage Committee agreed that:

“In an effort to acknowledge challenges and shortcomings, the report [presented by the Cambodian government] emphasizes at several points that the characteristics of the site (large size – 401 square kilometers, rural population of 100,000 people whose aspirations to upgrade their living conditions place them in continuous direct conflict with many of the conservation objectives of the Park) make rapid achievement of the conservation objectives underlined by the Committee quite difficult. The World Heritage Committee notes with satisfaction the efforts of the State Party to restructure institutional arrangements and the action of the Agence pour la protection et la sauvegarde d’Angkor (APSARA), facilitated by issuing of sub-decree 50 ANK/ BK in May 2008, and to bring increased emphasis to increasing heritage awareness among local communities. **The World Heritage Committee also notes the progress made by the State Party in controlling illegal activities within the property and requests the State Party to continue these efforts in the future.”²⁰**

¹⁹ UNESCO, 32d session of World Heritage Committee, 10 July 2008.

²⁰ UNESCO, 34th session of World Heritage Committee, 3 August 2010.

In 2014, the World Heritage Committee noted that the general situation of protected zones 1 and 2 was satisfactory, while specifying that “the battle is continuous”, because numerous violations were recorded during the period 2011-2013. In 2014, the number of cases of illegal land occupation decreased significantly due to the awareness of residents and the vigilance of the administration, and there was a drop in the rate of deforestation, practiced to create arable land. As before, the World Heritage Committee noted **“the progress made by the State Party in controlling illegal activities within the property and urges the State Party to further advance its efforts in this regard”**.²¹

In 2015, we observed the resumption of construction, often at night, of small shacks made of sheet metal or wooden panels.

On June 21, 2017, Dr. Mechtild Rössler, then director of the World Heritage Center, informed the Cambodian Ambassador to UNESCO of the existence of 500 illegal constructions on the protected site and questioned the Cambodian Government on the provisions that he intends to take to respect the obligations arising from the inscription of the Angkor site on the World Heritage List.²² Photos taken at altitude confirmed this significant increase in illegal construction. The following day, the International Coordinating Committee “congratulates APSARA for the measures taken to control the illegal building construction, including demolition and encourages the APSARA Authority to continue to strengthen the protection of zones 1 and 2 with the relevant regulatory provisions.”²³ The juxtaposition of these two documents illustrates the incessant pressure exerted by the squatters of the protected site. In the months that followed, APSARA carried out the dismantling of illegal constructions which had gone from 500 to nearly 600. This operation received the full support of the Director of the UNESCO Office in Phnom Penh who declared: **“We have seen tremendous growth of the population of Angkor Park in recent years. Thus, the containment of illegal constructions must be effective to preserve the value of Angkor’s heritage as well as the cultural landscape and everything that has original value in the park.”**²⁴

In December 2017, the International Coordinating Committee **“congratulated APSARA for having carried out the program to dismantle recent illegal constructions. » and recommends considering “carrying out another dismantling program for older constructions illegally located in sensitive areas”**.²⁵

The Cambodian Government continued to be very aware of the impact of the increasing persistence of illegal settlements and constructions in the protected area. APSARA informs its supervisory ministry and relayed the recurring concerns of UNESCO experts. This led then Prime Minister Hun Sen to explain the

²¹ UNESCO, 38th session of the World Heritage Committee, 25 June 2014.

²² Letter from Dr. Mechtild Rössler, Director of the World Heritage Center to Mr. Sophann Ket, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Delegate of the Kingdom of Cambodia to UNESCO, June 21, 2017.

²³ UNESCO, International Coordinating Committee, 28th technical session, 22 June 2017, Recommendation n°24.

²⁴ Khmer Times, 27 December 2017.

²⁵ UNESCO, International Coordinating Committee, 29th technical session, 13 December 2017, Recommendation n°23, p.19-20.

demolition of illegal constructions:

“Political parties always use land protestors when there is an upcoming election. If we allow people to encroach on land located in heritage sites, our temples will lose quality and will no longer be world heritage sites. In order to maintain the quality of our world heritage sites, we have no choice but to evict those people and demolish their homes. (...) They accuse my government of violating human rights and housing rights, but they do not consider what the reality is. (...) I hope that Cambodians will understand that we must maintain these thousand-year-old sites built by our ancestors. It is our duty to protect it.”²⁶

Other external pressures were exerted on the protected site including requests for the construction of hotels which do not respect the constraints imposed by the Royal Decree of 1994. Most of the time, once the pressures exerted on APSARA were rejected, provincial and government authorities are approached.

The most spectacular case was the gigantic project called “Angkor Lake of Wonders” which proposed to build a 75-hectare park 500 m from the protected area with a lake, three hotels and multiple attractions. It was presented by NagaCorp, one of Asia’s largest publicly traded gaming companies which owns and operates the largest integrated gaming and entertainment complex in the Mekong region. It has developed its activities in Cambodia and Hong Kong and is registered in the Cayman Islands. This project, presented in November 2020 as “a development project”, was first, as it is often the case, defended by some for the numerous jobs it would create. UNESCO did not fail to highlight the dangers for the integrity of the protected area. The Ministry of Culture immediately decided to submit the project to the meeting of International Coordinating Committee experts who met on 26 January 2021 and then to that of the International Coordinating Committee itself, the next day. Following their negative recommendations, the Government announced the abandonment of this project on 23 March.

This was yet another illustration of the Cambodian Government’s desire to give absolute priority to the protection of the Angkor site, despite all the pressures it may be subject to and the economic interests at stake. The World Heritage Committee, which met a few months later, commended Cambodia, “which, at the request of the World Heritage Centre and following the International Coordinating Committee -Angkor’s technical review, took prompt action to address the concern of the proposed project for the construction of a tourist complex of 75 hectares immediately outside the buffer zone of the property, and concluded that the project cannot be pursued in the current context.”²⁷

²⁶ Khmer Times, 5 December 2018.

²⁷ UNESCO, 44th session of the World Heritage Committee, 31 July 2021.

Chapter 6

Resettling the squatters



Various occasions where the community & sustainability development team of Apsara Authority granted permission for legal residents to renovate their houses
© Apsara Authority Website

The new APSARA missions

In 2021, a Government Sub-Decree reorganized the role and missions of the APSARA Authority. It was noted that, with regard to the Department of Regional Planning and Urban and Community Heritage, this involves collaboration with the institutions, units and local authorities concerned, in order to:

- Prepare and manage a land database on construction sites and local demographics.
- Prepare relevant regulations and rules on land management and the issuance of land titles/certificates in Zone 1 and Zone 2 of Angkor to people settled and living for a long time and monitor the implementation of the regulations and these rules
- Examine the procedure for issuing land titles in Angkor Park in accordance with regulations

- Examine and register the lands and archaeological sites of Angkor as public property.
- Examine the house renovation request, confirm the plots and prepare the building permit following the regulations in force, as well as monitor the construction and issue a certificate attesting that the construction follows the instructions and procedures of the APSARA National Authority.
- Establish a demographic survey team and monitor the growth of people and houses on the Angkor site.
- Organize the implementation of international cooperation projects to develop and improve the livelihoods of the populations of Angkor Park and other areas under the management of the APSARA National Authority.”

Concerning the APSARA Public Order Department, these are:

- “- Prevent all illegal and unauthorized constructions, confiscate materials and take administrative measures related to illegal and unauthorized constructions in the area under the control of the APSARA National Authority.
- Direct the implementation of interventions and demolition measures for illegal or unauthorized constructions on the Angkor site and in areas under the control of the APSARA National Authority in collaboration with the competent authorities and the various departments and units of the APSARA National Authority.”²⁸

Towards the resettlement

An inter-ministerial “Task Force” has been set up under the authority of Mr. Chea Sophara, Deputy Prime Minister, to resolve the issue of illegal occupants on the protected site of Angkor. A population census was carried out in August 2022, allowing each village to provide a complete identification of the people concerned and their property. This investigation provided the opportunity to identify more than 8,400 illegal constructions built between 2019 and 2022. It also revealed that many of these squatters lived in extreme deprivation and that their transfer would bring a significant improvement in their conditions. of life. This is what every human rights defender should consider a positive development. But this is not the case for Amnesty International.

On 9 September 2022, the Government took the decision to transfer families present illegally in protected areas to the Run Ta-Ek sites, the perimeter of which was enlarged next to the eco-village designed in 2008 and carried out from 2010 (Banteay Srei district) and towards that, currently being developed, of Peak Snèng (Angkor Thom district). A budget of more than \$100 million was allocated to this operation.

²⁸ Royal Government of Cambodia, Sub-Decree about the role and duties of APSARA National Authority, 28 December 2021

On 20 October 2022, Prime Minister Hun Sen declared that:

“The decision to move from the Angkor Archaeological Park to the resettlement area is the smart and right decision. Because this is done to preserve this historical site for generations to come. The Royal Government of Cambodia pays great attention to the new villages of the people. Two roads connecting the areas will be built, one with a distance of 55 km and the other with a distance of 46 km. They will cost \$46 million and \$94 million, respectively, to build. Besides roads, other infrastructure to be built includes hospitals, schools and markets.”

On the same day, Prime Minister Hun Sen informed the people that **“if the designated new area has not been completed and if they don’t have any transportation yet, they can remain in their old place for the time being”**. He reassured the population that the land people will receive in Ron Ta Ek and Peak Snèng are not social land concessions, “people will be owners.”²⁹ Remarks, made before the start of rehousing, which Amnesty undoubtedly compared to “subtle threats”.



Samdach Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo HUN SEN, former prime minister of Cambodia during his visit to Run Ta Ek in 2022
© Agence Kamphuchea Press (AKP)

²⁹ 20 October 2022, <https://pressocm.gov.kh/archives/76886>

A serious threat

It was time for radical measures to be taken because the International Coordinating Committee, in December 2022, following the increase in illicit constructions, not only repeated the recommendations expressed in 2017:

- recommends to consider the implementation of another dismantling program for more ancient illegal buildings located in sensitive areas,
- recommends the preparation and implementation of an action plan to prevent any illegal construction in zones 1 and 2 in the future.

But the International Coordinating Committee added: “the multiplication, in recent years, of illegal settlements on the Angkor site, poses objective problems of compatibility with the **maintenance** of the outstanding universal value of this site”. Consequently, it is recommended that APSARA “continue to implement appropriate measures to deal with those illegal buildings, focusing on keeping Angkor as one of the iconic World Heritage sites”.³⁰

Recalling that the “outstanding universal value” of the site refers to article 172 mentioned in the first chapter of this brochure. It is obvious that, tired of observing the persistence of illegal settlements, the International Coordinating Committee mentioned for the first time “the **maintenance** of the outstanding value of the site” and, in its recommendations, it asks that measures be taken as to “**keeping** Angkor as one of the iconic World Heritage sites”. If these words have any meaning, the future of the site’s inscription depends on the disappearance of illicit settlements.

Faced with such a risk, the Government was reassured in its decision to implement a massive rehousing program for local communities illegally settled on the site. The Government does not forget that a year earlier, the World Heritage Committee removed the historic site of the port of Liverpool in Great Britain because, according to the World Heritage Committee, “new constructions undermined the authenticity and to the integrity of the site.”³¹

The conditions of the resettlement

The “Task Force” decided to begin the transfer in the last weeks of 2022. After the census carried out in August 2022 and the granting to each of a residence book indicating their status (legal or illegal), a call for voluntary departure was launched. According to APSARA, after the appeal launched to which thousands responded, after consultation with the squatters, of the 67,682 families identified throughout the Angkor Park, 9,837 families³² agreed to be rehoused after

³⁰ UNESCO, International Coordinating Committee, 36th technical session and 29th plenary session, 15-16 December 2022, p.17-18.

³¹ UNESCO communique, 21 July 2021.

³² That is, considering an average of 4 people per family, respectively 270,728 people (which gives an idea of the very significant increase in the total population of the site since 2005) and 39,348 to be rehoused.

being told that they would receive, either on the Run Ta Ek site (25 km away) or on the Peak Snèng site (19 km away):

- a plot of land measuring 20x30m, or 600 m², which the families will own,
- a sum of \$350,
- registration in a social fund granting for ten years each family free access to health care and a monthly sum, the amount of which varies depending on the number of family members,
- construction equipment,
- connection to water and electricity,
- two months of food,
- a site equipped with a primary school, a middle school and a high school, a hospital including a maternity ward, an administrative center and a pagoda.



Various facilities are being built in Run Ta Ek including pagoda, hospital, market, school and administrative center among others

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On 14 June 2023, International Coordinating Committee experts conducted an in-depth visit to the Run Ta-Ek and Peak Snèng new development areas. The International Coordinating Committee report highlights that:

“the ad hoc Experts noted, with satisfaction, the proper implementation of the territorial development and public equipment works, both in one site and in the other. This work is continuing in excellent conditions and visits by ad hoc Experts will be organized whenever necessary.” “With regard to Peak Snèng area and with a view, in particular, to ensuring employment opportunities, on the spot, for the relocated persons who illicitly occupied archeological land in the Angkor Park, it is recommended to reserve a plot of land on site. This land is intended to accommodate a technical manufacturing unit planned by a Japanese investment company belonging to the “Royal Group, Phnom Penh Special Economic Zone.”³³

Referring to this visit by the experts in June 2023, the Japanese Embassy in Phnom Penh confirmed that “the experts were generally impressed by the changes that have occurred since their last visit in December 2022.”

In July 2023, Mr. Long Kosal, Deputy Director General and Spokesperson of APSARA, provided clear information in response to the report from Amnesty International, an NGO which never took the trouble to meet APSARA officials:³⁴

“Two groups of people live in Angkor. There are the people who have been living in Angkor for generations in 112 villages. Those whose families stretched back generations were allowed to stay and renovate, but not extend, their home. They are the people we call the protectors of Angkor. The other category is the people that migrated from all over the country to occupy Angkor illegally. The number of residents living illegally had kept rising. There are no human rights issues. While they are doing things illegally, they cannot do it properly. Their house is not a house. It is a hut. They do not have a proper toilet. Sanitation is zero. There is no clean water. The living conditions are very poor, exposing themselves to danger. So many health issues are there, so that’s the problem. Some had paid for land from people who were not entitled to sell, with transactions signed off by village chiefs ignorant of the law. The land that they said that they bought is illegal. They have no land title, no rights to build a house, no rights to occupy there or to live there. We are asking them to volunteer to leave the site because we care for their future. There is no future for the younger generation. Now they get a plot of land 20 meters by 30 meters. With that plot, they will have title recognized by the state. They will have a health center, a hospital, a school, clean water, a market, a pagoda. Everything to support a place to live is being set up by the government for them.

³³ UNESCO, International Coordinating Committee 37th technical session, 12-13 June 2023, p.12.

³⁴ On 12 September 2023, the APSARA Authority publicly expressed regret that Amnesty did not come on site to receive the information that the Authority had to provide and did not respond positively to its invitation.

Is that a matter of human rights or is that a matter of making their lives better? At their new place, the children can go to school. They have a primary school, secondary school and high school. They have also a hospital, maternity section and general health clinic. With the support of the government, they also get an ID Poor card and that is to be supported for 10 years. While they are living in their old homes, they did not have such social programs.”³⁵



Cambodia's Prime Minister Samdach Moha Borvor Thipadei HUN MANET during his visit to Ruk Ta Ek in December 8th, 2023
© Agence Kamphuchea Press (AKP)

³⁵ Free translation of an interview given to the media Thmey Thmey and reproduced on Cambodians, 9 July 2023.

In August 2023, in its report to the Ministry of Regional Planning, the “Task Force” indicated that the distribution of current rehousing concerned 5,865 families in Run Ta Ek and 3,972 families in Peak Snèng. He reported that 4,369 illegal constructions were destroyed on the protected site.

In September 2023, the World Heritage Committee noted that “the encroachment of illegal settlements within the property is being addressed by relocation of illegal occupants, which has been reported by third party, **including a letter from Amnesty International**, as a violation of human rights.”

The World Heritage Committee recalls the reasons for the operations in progress and takes note of them:

“The zoning regulations and the applicable laws clearly define the use of the different zones within the property. Although the local communities and inhabitants already present before the inscription (across 112 villages) are not the subject of current programme of resident relocation, recent uncontrolled illegal settlements and illegal constructions are regarded by the State Party and conservation experts as incompatible with the required visual, sanitary, safety and environmental standards to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the property. The new settlements may also physically affect archaeological remains and landscape attributes. Demographic pressure within the archaeological park, and environmental and land use requirements have supported a decision to relocate illegal settlers, rather than forcing their eviction. To date, 9,000 families from zones 1 and 2 have moved on to two nearby resettlement areas with improved facilities (Run Ta Ek and Peak Snèng). This situation was reported as disturbing social cohesion and causing inequity. The settlements were inspected by the ad hoc experts of the International Coordinating Committee-Angkor in December 2022. Having regard to the recommendations of the International Coordinating Committee-Angkor, the Committee may wish to recommend that the State Party continue its efforts to maintain the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property, ensure decent living conditions for all inhabitants and communities, and note measures taken for resettlement of illegal occupants. The Committee may also request the State Party to reinforce its outreach to all local populations to raise awareness about the importance of zoning regulations for the preservation of the property, and to avoid major social destabilization arising from unlawful settling.”

Consequently, in its recommendations, the World Heritage Committee

Takes note that the State Party has been acting to enforce zoning regulations and has relocated families who settled illegally in the property, taking into ac-

count the threats that may be posed to the integrity and authenticity of the property and its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), and therefore requests the State Party, taking into consideration the living conditions and the rights of local communities and inhabitants affected by these relocations and those already living lawfully within the property boundaries prior to inscription, to continue implementing appropriate measures for the management of the World Heritage property and its OUV, as well as to reinforce awareness of zoning regulations for all local populations.³⁶

In December 2023, Dr. Mounir Boushenaki, one of the international experts advising the International Coordinating Committee, visited first the places where the squatters used to live. He first met some of them:

“When we asked them ‘what is your situation?’”, the answer was “We are very poor. We have no water, no electricity, nothing. See the situation we live in. »

The Dr. Boushenaki adds about the squats:

“We were ashamed to take photos because it was a really very, very bad situation in terms of health, unacceptable for human beings. Also, we were very happy as we came to Run Ta Ek and the APSARA team explained to us that the government had granted land to the squatters to relocate them. “It’s a very strong decision. We don’t see in many places around the world that the government is asking squatters to leave and giving them land.»³⁷ This expert expressed social concerns which do not appear to be those of Amnesty International.



Run Ta Ek enjoying their time along the street
© Agence Kamphuchea Press (AKP)

³⁶ UNESCO, 45th session of the World Heritage Committee, 25 September 2023.

³⁷ Interview granted to the media Thmey Thmey News and reproduced on Cambodianess, 27 December 2023.



The monastery of Run Ta Ek Pagoda
© Ministry of Cult and Religion

Chapter 7

Amnesty International's accusations

In November 2023, under the sensational title “Nobody wants to leave their home”, Amnesty International published a report in which the Cambodian Government was violently accused, in the most outrageous terms, of carrying out “mass forced evictions” which had “cruelly uprooted families who had lived in Angkor for several generations.” In a country where, less than fifty years ago, a genocidal regime carried out real massive and cruel forced deportations, the expressions used are not innocent and intended to assimilate the current Government to that of Pol Pot. Nothing is true in this report which claims to be based on the testimonies of more than 100 people collected between March and July 2023.³⁸

Let's take a look one by one at the accusations made by this NGO. But first, let's question the validity of those prosecution witnesses. Who are these people? What the report ignores is that these witnesses are illegal occupants of the protected site. The witnesses are perpetrators whom Amnesty transforms into victims. The credibility of their testimonies is therefore very questionable. The report indicates that its witnesses are sellers, restaurateurs, farmers, civil servants, hairdressers, hotel workers, tuk-tuk drivers. And the report even mentions, to underline the aberrant nature of “forced evictions”, tourist guides, makers of traditional instruments, stonecutters responsible for restoring temples, i.e. professions which contribute to the achievement of the dual objective of protection of monumental heritage and human heritage. What the report ignores is that several of the activities mentioned are those that affect the protected nature of the exceptional sacred site of Angkor. Once again, the Angkor site is not a gastronomic destination. Temples are not places to drink, eat or shopping. No more in Angkor than in Borobudur or Sukhothai. Let us add that the hundred witnesses quoted represent barely 0.25% of the 39,348 people³⁹ who are the subject of this rehousing!

First accusation: the rehousing would be “forced evictions” so there would have been coercion. Amnesty claims to have identified “direct and subtle threats”. Remember that the assertions of this NGO are based on testimonies from people in an illegal situation. The fact that their situation has been recalled by the authorities cannot therefore be presented as a threat. No more than the mention of the consequences of a refusal. That the authorities made multiple visits to people who persisted in an illegal presence and with full knowledge of the facts on a protected site to remind them of this illegal situation is in no way comparable to “direct or subtle threats. That the authorities have highlighted the advantages of this rehousing compared to their current situation is at most an

³⁸ AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, press release, 21 March 2023; Report: “Nobody wants to leave their home. Thousands evicted at Angkor in Cambodia”, 14 November 2023.

³⁹ 9,837 families are involved. If we count 4 members per family this is equivalent to 39,348 people.

incentive and in no way a threat. There was no constraint. It must be noted that the main one of these advantages has been ignored by Amnesty: the granting to people who were previously in an illegal situation of a property title for the 20 x 30 m plot that they receive. A plot of 600 m² in a province where the market value per m² varies between \$150 and \$3,000/m² is far from being what Amnesty calls a “empty plot” of land, a restrictive vocabulary, intentionally used by an NGO that claims to be neutral. Let us add that the intention to cause harm on the part of this NGO is evident when it illustrates its report with photos representing military trucks. As if it were a question of proving the constraint when these military engineering units were made available to facilitate the moving of the goods of the rehoused people.



Run Ta Ek Eco Village
© Agence Kamphuchea Press (AKP)

Second accusation: it would be “evictions”. If the words have any meaning, an expulsion is equivalent to putting, if necessary, by the use of force, a family on the street. However, in the case that concerns us, it is a question of rehousing. As with the creation, from 2010, of the Run Ta-Ek eco-village, people are relocated to land of which they become owners. What Amnesty remains silent about, deploring that these people had to rebuild their homes themselves by exposing themselves to bad weather, is that these people had been able to build themselves, at their own expense, in the same climate conditions, their illegal housing while on the new site, the land, money and basic materials for the reconstruction of housing are offered to them. This is in no way an expulsion, but rather a matter of rehousing.

Third accusation: “the Cambodian authorities have failed to adequately inform people” On 25 September 2023, in response to a letter from Amnesty, the World Heritage Committee refuted this accusation (see previous chapter). In the delirium of the author of this report to accumulate baseless accusations, he did not realize that invoking the repeated visits of the different authorities is to provide a denial to the assertion of the lack of information. For thirty years, the zoning of the protected site has been established. For twenty years, people likely to benefit from long-term resident status have been clearly identified and their rights notified. For twenty years, the delimitation of zones and the rights and duties relating to them has, as we saw previously in this study (see chapter 4), been the subject of intensive information campaigns. Warnings addressed to those who entered the protected site illegally were repeated ad nauseam by APSARA: “those who arrived on the site before 2004 are legal residents; those who arrived later are illegal residents.” But the propensity to feign ignorance of the law and to circumvent it, traditional among the Khmers, was manifested on the site of Angkor as in the rest of the country. Amnesty lies. The displaced people were more than informed.

Fourth accusation: evicted families have lived on the protected site “for several generations”. This is totally false. The evicted families are those who were not living on the site during the 2004 census, who settled after this date completely illegally. The families present on the site at the time of its inscription as World Heritage in 1992 and until 2004, who respected the rules, are protected, as has been specified in several UNESCO documents, in several Cambodian legal texts and in abundant documentation distributed by APSARA. As we have seen, specific provisions govern the wishes of these families to renovate or even rebuild their homes. The growth of families was taken into account and was the origin, from 2010, of the Run Ta Ek eco-village (designed in 2008) where 850 families received one hectare and a house. An exemplary site which, obviously, Amnesty has not reported. What credit can be given to a relocated person when she claims that she had lived on the protected site “for 70 years”. That is, since 1953. So, well before 2004. If this were really the case, she would have been the subject of successive censuses and she would have been classified among the people retaining the right to stay on the protected site. We observe once again, in the use of such a witness, the total absence of concern for objectivity on the part of Amnesty.

Fifth accusation: the rehousing would not be “voluntary”. And to quote this sentence from an old lady “Nobody wants to leave their house”. Everyone understands this. But who is to blame when we are forced to leave housing that was created completely illegally? There is no doubt that having to move is not necessarily a choice that we accept happily. This is why the authorities argued and highlighted the advantages of leaving and the risks of staying. What’s more normal when speaking to people in an illegal situation? This is neither “threats”

nor “intimidation” as Amnesty asserts, using deliberately excessive terms, but the duty of the authorities to provide complete information. None of these witnesses reported on the consultation organized by APSARA. And for good reason. Neither does Amnesty. Once again, Amnesty lends a sympathetic ear to people who have cheated, who lie and who present themselves as victims. But they are victims of their own faults.



Above: Free public bus, connection Siem Reap town to Run Ta Ek Techo Sen City © Agence Kamphuchea Press (AKP)
Below: Teenagers playing basketball in Run Ta Ek primary and high school © Agence Kamphuchea Press (AKP)



Drone shot of Run Ta Ek primary and high school
© Agence Kamphuchea Press (AKP)

Sixth accusation: rehousing would be undertaken to move people towards sites “lacking essential services”. According to Amnesty, “Cambodian authorities failed to ensure that the main resettlement site, Run Ta Ek, was adequately equipped with essential services and infrastructure when people began to settle there.” If we can, at most, concede that the first six months were complicated for the first arrivals (like their first months when they settled illegally in the Angkor Park), early August 2023 – that is to say shortly after Amnesty carried out a supposedly objective visit to the site – the progress of the equipment work on this site was the subject of an estimate by the “task force” led by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Land Management. At the beginning of August 2023, the line of 165 km of road was completed and ready to be concreted or asphalted, the construction of the hospital including a maternity and that of a middle school and a high school, including a library with three rooms, were completed. The primary school is operational. The drinking water distribution and electricity distribution networks are in place and 28% of the population was connected to drinking water as well as 97% to electricity. The construction of an administrative center was 70% complete. The construction of a pagoda was 87% complete. These figures belie the gratuitous and misleading assertions of Amnesty which obviously does not take into account the scale of such rehousing of thousands of people and the inevitable making progress in stages of the equipment work. As for the Peak Snèng site, it is true that most of the equipment was, in August 2023, only around 50-70% completed. Amnesty, obviously, makes no mention that the equipment problem was taken into account by the **Prime Minister who, as we recalled above, declared on 20 October 1922 – that is to say, two months before the start of the first transfers – regarding**

people to be transferred: “if the designated new area has not been completed and if they do not have any transportation yet, they can remain in their old place for the time being.”⁴⁰

Significant of a true intent to harm are the accusations that Amnesty makes on issues that every Cambodian will find derisory. That the site is “easily flooded”? Obviously. In the rainy season, all of Cambodia is easily flooded. Everyone knows it, but Amnesty pretends to ignore it. Even the boulevard in front of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh is under water after a downpour. In Cambodia, as in many other countries, due to climate change – a phenomenon of which Amnesty seems to be unaware – major floods have affected millions of people. Not just at Run Ta Ek. That “high temperatures prevent a baby from sleeping”, what could be more normal in a tropical country where this is the fate of millions of people, when they do not live in houses equipped with ventilation or air conditioning? Faced with such concern for denigration, we cannot help but be stunned by the use of such arguments. The same goes for the photos chosen to illustrate this report, which all aim to offer the spectacle of desolation. No photos of the school group, the hospital, the wooden or solid houses, the already concreted roads, the new shops and restaurants...

Seventh accusation: Amnesty suggests that “these cruel forced evictions” belong to the current practice of the Cambodian Government which would use the role of UNESCO as a pretext. Amnesty’s desire to question the relevance of the government’s motivations is evident in the use of phrases such as “**seemingly** to protect the location’s World Heritage site” or “one **apparent** reason for the evictions stems the zoning of ‘Angkor’ or again “the conservation efforts will increasingly be weaponized by states to **their own ends**”, or event “the Cambodian Government has not adequately complied with their obligation to demonstrate that these evictions are unavoidable”. First answer: what interest would the Cambodian Government have in rehousing nearly 40,000 people and heavily burdening its budget to carry out this operation, if not to protect a heritage of exceptional universal value? The Cambodian Government is aware that it bears a major responsibility in ensuring this protection not only for the Cambodian people, but for all of humanity. Second response: as we have read in the preceding chapters, UNESCO, since 1992, has not ceased to express strong concern about the protection of zones 1 and 2 and has not stopped to encourage APSARA to put an end to illegal housing and activities. To the point of even mentioning “maintaining the exceptional value of the site”. Amnesty deplores that UNESCO “has not publicly condemned the forced evacuations at Angkor and has not even acknowledged that they took place”. But if UNESCO acted in this way, it is because this UN organization recognizes that Amnesty’s accusations are unfounded, as independent experts who visited the Run Ta Ek site testified.

⁴⁰ 20 octobre 2022 <https://pressocm.gov.kh/archives/76886>

The latest accusation: is that the Run Ta Ek and Peak Snèng sites are far from Angkor Park and the city of Siem Reap, which would penalize people looking for work. As we have seen, the two sites are far from the temples and Siem Reap by a distance much less than the 45 minute drive mentioned by Amnesty. To meet the travel difficulties of residents, on 8 December 2023, during a visit to the Run Ta Ek site, Prime Minister Hun Manet announced that a free daily shuttle of 10 buses will connect the site and the city of Siem Reap. It should also be noted that the two sites of Run Ta Ek and Peak Snèng are located at the intersection of three development poles: the new Siem Reap airport, the Banteay Srei tourist area and the Phnom Kulen tourist area. They are located near the expressway leading to the new airport and the national highway leading to Thailand. Industrial investment projects are being studied and even announced by the World Heritage Committee. Amnesty also deplores that, for rehoused farmers, they are far from their agricultural land. What Amnesty seems to ignore is that these farmers retain the use of agricultural land that does not belong to them provided that from now on they respect the rules for protecting the forest park. A fact which also dismisses the complaints of those who deplore that they were not granted at Run Ta Ek or Peak Snèng the same area of agricultural land that they cultivated on the protected site.

When we observe that the total population of the 112 villages on the entire Angkor site amounted in August 2023 to 67,682 families and that only 9,837 families were in an illegal situation – or 14.53% – and were therefore affected by the rehousing operation, we must note that the objective shared by UNESCO and the Government of Cambodia to maintain a balance between protection of monumental heritage and protection of living heritage is a success story.

We cannot help but think, when we visit the two Run Ta Ek sites today, that the new inhabitants of Run Ta Ek like those of the eponymous eco-village are very lucky, if we compares with the conditions of thousands of Cambodian villages whose houses are invaded by dust from dirt roads during the dry season and stuck in mud during the rainy season, where public distribution of drinking water does not yet exist and where seeking urgent healthcare requires traveling long distances. Those whom Amnesty presents as victims are in fact privileged people.

Investigate to Condemn and Discredit

The writing, by Amnesty International, of particularly moving stories attributed to anonymous witnesses, the repeated lies by omission, the intentional choice of particularly distressing photos not representative of reality, the calls for pity, all indications which testify to the fragility of the accusations made by this NGO whose credibility, concerning Cambodia, is largely overestimated.

Amnesty is investigating and charging Cambodia, with a systematically complacent ear for those who oppose the authorities without verifying who its interlocutors are and what their motivations may be. How can we give credit to people who have put themselves in an illegal situation? How can we not understand that their criticisms addressed to the local authorities (whom they had previously bribed) and to APSARA staff are those of a culprit who is trying to exonerate himself by accusing those who are responsible for enforcing the law?

Once again, Amnesty International's intention was to damage Cambodia's image. As it did during the Covid crisis, when the whole world recognized the excellence of the management of this crisis by the Cambodian Government. From the point of view of slander, it has been a total success if we count the numerous articles in the international press which took up, with the same emphasis, the accusations of this NGO, without ever checking with the authorities, and APSARA in particular, the merits of the accusations made by an organization which benefits from undeserved credit.

We were treated to the most shocking headlines: "Entire villages will be wiped off the map" (Le Figaro, Paris) "Does the Angkor site still have a soul without its villages" (Courrier international, Paris). Ignoring the fact that not a single one of the 112 villages have been dismantled! Not to mention all the newspapers in English language which have used Amnesty's formula of "mass forced evictions" in their titles. "Speculative pressures" were even invoked to justify the "cruel evictions" (Libération, Paris). Speculation on untouchable lands since they are protected by World Heritage? How stupid does it go!

We hope that with the same space given to the accusations, the international press will accept the corrections which reduce them to nothing. But we doubt.



Road being continuously built in Run Ta Ek
© Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction





Run Ta Ek Techo Sen City Landscape
© Apsara Authority



About the Author

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