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BROOKLYN NON-PROFIT SOLE HOPE FOR CAMBODIAN LAND GRAB VICTIMS

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, JULY 31 2008 - Brooklyn Bridge to Cambodia (BB2C) - a small nonprofit - is the only aid group getting help to homeless villagers from the remote village of Chey Seina in Kampot province. The charity, founded by Paula Shirk, the adoptive mother of a six year-old Cambodian boy now growing up in Brooklyn Heights, immediately sent supplies when news broke of escalating violence in her son's birth parents' village, 90 miles southwest of Phnom Penh. The group's resources are now exhausted and it is appealing for donations to continue providing families from Kampot with the bare essentials for survival.

On June 21 and 22, *The Voice of America* reported that "a security force of about 100 troops, equipped with rifles, axes and hammers," descended on the village and began tearing down and burning homes. Among the homeless, the birth family of Rudi Shirk, Paula's adopted son. BB2C recently helped Rudi's birth family buy their own land from the local authorities, Paula said. "Owning property was a dream for the family who worked incredibly hard to contribute \$500 – a huge sum for them. Now their dream has been shattered and they and their fellow villagers have nothing."

At first, hundreds of men, women and children stayed, without shelter, on their land, afraid that if they left they would never get it back. The villagers were starving, subsisting on wild fruit, and BB2C was the only group to get food, blankets, plastic sheeting and mosquito nets to the victims. With limited funds, the only food the nonprofit has been able to supply is rice and fish paste sufficient for two weeks.

According to Naly Pilorge, director of the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), NGOs and United Nations representatives were prevented from entering the site or aiding the villagers. Radio Free Asia reported that Royal Cambodian Armed Forces Brigade 31, led by Srun Saroeun, drove the villagers off the land. One witness said: "The Khmer Rouge arrested us and then killed us immediately, so we did not suffer long time. But now they wants

us to suffer for the whole lives, no house to stay, no land to plant things, and they stopped us from finding foods.”

Under cover of darkness, the villagers traveled to Phnom Penh to camp out in front of Prime Minister Hun Sen’s residence, with the desperate hope that he would intervene on their behalf. Srun followed them there and had his troops forcibly take documents from them which showed they legally owned the land in question. At least one person was badly beaten. Again, the villagers were driven off, prevented even from taking refuge in a nearby pagoda. They are now in hiding on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, in desperate need of food, water and shelter.

Seizing land in Cambodia is not uncommon. The Phnom Penh Post, June 13-26, reported that a petition demanding the return of illegally seized land to its rightful owners, thumb printed by 42,000 Cambodians, was handed to the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights in Phnom Penh. The UN’s human rights envoy, Yash Ghai has, according to Reuters, criticized Cambodia for failing to protect the rights of the poor, noting that land was routinely seized by large businesses with government connections and the courts did nothing. “Their lands are being stolen,” said Ghai.

Global Witness, an NGO based in London, has detailed the illegal land seizures in its 2007 report, “Cambodia’s Family Trees,” and its 2004 report, “Taking a Cut,” which specifically mentions Srun Saroeun’s involvement in the cruelty and corruption.

“Right now we hope others will contribute to help the people of Kampot,” said Paula. “For the longer term we are talking to a lawyer who hopefully will assist Rudi’s birth family and the others in their fight to get their land back. We also plan to start a U.S petition supporting them.

“It’s unbelievably sad that - after what these people suffered under Pol Pot, plus their daily struggle to make a living - they would be treated in such a violent manner.”

Donations should be sent to: Brooklyn Bridge to Cambodia, c/o Paula Shirk, 20 Sidney Place, Brooklyn, NY 11201.

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