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# Rooftop slum communities are besieged by drug use, rampant crime and the lack of basic sanitation, but the Phnom Penh municipality has no budget to go around

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Poverty on the rooftops of PPenh

Written by Eleanor Ainge Roy and Mom Kunthear

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Rooftop slum communities are besieged by drug use, rampant crime and the lack of basic sanitation, but the municipality says there is simply not enough money to help the situation

THE stairwell leading up to the roof of the former Sokha Lay hotel near Central Market is pitch black in the middle of the day and full of rats, rubbish and dirty needles.

Residents complain that drug addicts hide out there and that rival gangs fight on the premises. Parents worry for their daughters' safety and fear that the vomit and blood inside the building are bad for everyone's health.

As you reach the roof, the building lightens and the fresh air clears the stench. Emerging into the sunshine, you expect to see sweeping views of the city. Instead, you find dense rows of flimsy shacks and pots of flowers and herbs – an entire community living beneath the open skies of the city.

"These communities have been here a long time," said Somethearith Din, a project manager at the UN Human Settlements Program (UN– Habitat).

"They first sprang up in 1979 after the fall of the Khmer Rouge when people moved back into the city. Housing was being granted on a first come, first serve basis, and wherever you could find a vacancy you moved in."

Rooftop slum settlements are mostly located around the major markets – O'Russei, Kandal, Central Market and the Old market – established on

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the roofs of 1960s-era Chinese apartment buildings.

#### Fire sparks investigation

In early 2003 the biggest settlement, on the roof of Angkor Meanchey near Central Market, caught fire and caused extensive damage to the rest of the building. The fire provoked a municipal government investigation into the state of rooftop housing.

After extensive research, the municipal government decided that the slums could remain if they took fire safety precautions and built only light structures that would not threaten the foundations of the buildings.

"According to our information, the majority of these rooftop dwellers settled in Phnom Penh in 1993, and most of them are Cambodian refugees from the Thai border camps," said Sar Bannang, deputy director of the Municipal Department of Land Management.

"Of course, we are very concerned about the health and safety of this group.... But our obstacle to resolving these issues is funds. We just don't have enough funds to find another place for them to build houses."

The decision to let these people stay came as a relief to inhabitants who feared being moved away from their jobs in central Phnom Penh.

"I make 4,000 to 10,000 riels each day washing clothes for people in this crowded area," said Nhem Sorn, 70, who lives with her three widowed daughters on the roof of a building overlooking Kandal market. "If I did not have this work, I wouldn't be able to survive."

#### Not forgotten

Sar Bannang says the residents of the rooftops have not been forgotten and that their concerns are still on the agenda.

"Phnom Penh Municipality has never forgotten them," he said. "We are still trying to help them.... We don't have the budget right now, but that does not mean that we never will."

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When I climb the stairs, It is not the ghosts that frighten me but the gangsters.

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Many people who live on the rooftops of Phnom Penh say they have nowhere else to go. The children have rotting teeth and under-nourished bodies, and even though they shout greetings at passing tourists, their English progresses no further, since their parents

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cannot afford to send them to school.

The shacks that sit atop the old Sokha Lay Hotel are constructed from weathered wood and tin, and the holes are patched with plastic and sheets of tarp. The one squat toilet on the roof is shared by 20 to 30 families and sits out in the open for everyone to see. When it rains, the community floods, and if a strong wind blows, the roofing breaks free.

Horm Vichsreypich, 18, has been living on the roof of Sokha Hotel for 10 years and dreams of one day moving to a house on the ground.

"I am often afraid that my house will fly into the air when it is windy, and when it rains, the water comes into my house," she said.

"Also, when I climb the stairs to reach here I am scared. It is not ghosts that frighten me but the gangsters."

More crowded

As more children are born and married off, the rooftop communities grow more crowded, as residents rent out space when money is short or divide their shacks for their married children.

Somethearith Din of UN-Habitat says the rooftop slums could be vastly improved with the installation of simple sanitation facilities like taps for washing and squat toilets.

But he is not hopeful that these improvements will be made, either by the municipal government, his own organization or other NGOs, as there are thousands of slum settlements across Cambodia that suffer from similar conditions.

"The residents who live on the ground floor and first floor are usually well off and maintain their houses adequately. But the people who live on the roof are the poorest of all," he said.

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