

Speech by
H.E. PRAK Sokhonn,
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Cooperation
At the
International Conference on Cultural Property
Protection: The Prevention of the Illicit
Trafficking of Cultural Properties- An ASEAN
Perspective

Siem Reap, 5th September, 2022

- Excellency Dr Phoeung Sakona, Minister of Culture and Fine Arts,
- Excellencies, ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts,
- Excellency ASEAN Deputy Secretary-General,
- Distinguished Guests, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

1. Good morning to you all. I wish I could be among you physically in Siem Reap to welcome you but unfortunately other duties and engagements prevent me from doing so. But I'm sure you are all in good hands with Minister Sakona.

2. And I am also sure that it is not by coincidence that Minister Phoeung Sakona has arranged to have you all

attending this **International Conference on Cultural Property Protection** at the heart of this town so rich in cultural heritage, a home of Angkor Archeological Sites, of thousands of ancient temples, and the site of UNESCO World Heritage. I believe there is no better place in Cambodia than Siemreap, our ASEAN City of Culture, for Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts to meet and discuss on such a sensitive topic of illicit trafficking of cultural properties.

3. I am indeed truly grateful that so many of you are physically here to appreciate the richness of our culture, the beauty of our antiquities, and certainly to get first-hand information on the challenges we face in protecting them against theft, looting, and illicit trafficking for the international art markets.

4. Compared to other ASEAN countries, I believe Cambodia has suffered the most in terms of trafficking, vandalism, pillaging, and illegal excavation during the many decades of civil war and instability. On the demand side, the growth of the black market in cultural property has led as well to the dismemberment of many of our heritage monuments and ancient sites.

Excellencies, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

5. The theft and illicit trafficking of cultural property is an international criminal activity, only surpassed by drugs and arms trafficking. It is a major multilateral challenge

that has to be addressed by all ASEAN countries. As the Chair of ASEAN this year, Cambodia is so mindful of all the challenges facing us and the theme of our Chairmanship “**ASEAN A.C.T.: Addressing Challenges Together**” is a clear reflection of these concerns. On this particular matter, Cambodia is keen to get the international community to collaborate with us in the fight against illicit trafficking so that we can secure more repatriation of these cultural properties to the respective ASEAN nations.

6. I am pleased to say that we do have a lot of lessons to share to our ASEAN colleagues in the next few days. Cambodia has recently made great strides in repatriating some of our stolen national treasures. As early as last month, law enforcement authorities in the United States have returned to us 30 antiquities that were smuggled out of our country in the past.

7. I can proudly mention two sculptures of particular grandeur and historical importance - a 10th century sandstone statue of the Hindu god Skanda on a Peacock, stolen from the Prasat Krachap temple at Koh Ker, and a three-ton sculpture of the elephant god Ganesha from Prasat Bak also at Koh Ker. Here, I want to express, once again, our sincere thanks to the United States relevant authorities for their cooperation and I can see from the Conference program that they are here to share their experiences on the process of retrieving this cultural heritage.

Excellencies, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

8. The return of these 30 antiquities is only a small win in our international fight against these illicit trafficking. Hundreds if not thousands more of these priceless national jewels are still out there. They were looted from our Angkor Wat temples, from Borobudur, Bagan, Luong Prabang and many more places in our region. This is not a challenge for Cambodia alone. It is a global problem that involves wealthy collectors, private dealers, gallery owners and even some of the world's most prestigious places.

9. The magnitude of this problem is indeed huge. My Government is committed to put a stop to the trafficking of our antiquities and we will work together with like-minded ASEAN governments, international organizations, and private sector partners to bring this to an end. We need to commit and to continue our fight to protect the soul of our cultural heritage and prevent the priceless antiquities from being further plundered, looted and spirited away from the country.

10. I truly hope that all the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts could collaborate to identify concrete and actionable proposals to enhance the protection mechanism for our cultural treasures. My understanding is that we all have ratified the **“1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of**

Ownership of Cultural Property”. We still need to work bilaterally with other countries, especially the United States of America and other rich countries. We need to strike more international alliances to support our efforts to return back many more stolen national treasures.

11. It will be certainly a long and difficult struggle, but I can assure you, it is well worth it. Cultural traditions are an integral part of ASEAN’s intangible heritage and it is an effective means of bringing together ASEAN peoples to recognize their regional identity. By acting together, we can and we will address this challenge.

12. In closing, I wish you a fruitful event and I hope that you can take the time to enjoy our rich culinary Khmer delight as well during your stay here.

13. On that note, I am pleased to officially declare the “International Conference on Cultural Property Protection: The Prevention of the Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Properties- An ASEAN Perspective” open.

Thank you.