

Special Rapporteur on the right to an adequate standard of living

Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia

Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights

Special Rapporteur on the right to food

Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples

Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons

via

Ms Federica Donati

Officer-in-charge,

Special Procedures Branch

Office of the United Nations High

Commissioner for Human Rights

13 December 2024

**Culture Sector
World Heritage Centre**

Ref: CLT/WHC/APA/HG/24/109

Subject: World Heritage property 'Angkor' (Cambodia)

Dear Special Rapporteurs,

I wish to thank you for your letter of 17 October last (ref. AL OTH 136/2024), in which you seek inputs from UNESCO in relation to the displacement and resettlement of populations from the World Heritage property of 'Angkor' (Cambodia), which was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1992.

First, I would like to thank the Special Rapporteurs for their essential work in the United Nations system and for providing their analysis on the current situation in Cambodia. Moreover, I am grateful for your message concerning this important matter, which the UNESCO World Heritage Centre has been closely monitoring. Please rest assured that we have taken good note of the serious concerns you expressed regarding the rights and conditions of populations resettled from the archaeological site of Angkor – concerns which echo those expressed on several occasions by UNESCO.

The respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is at the heart of the work carried out by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and these values are embedded in the principles of UNESCO's Conventions, including the 1972 Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (hereafter the World Heritage Convention).

While the conservation and management of a World Heritage property remains under the sole authority of the State Party on whose territory it is located, UNESCO actively advocates among its Member States for communities to be fully included and respected in the management of World Heritage sites. States Parties are encouraged to adopt a human-rights based approach and ensure gender-balanced participation of a wide

variety of stakeholders and rights-holders, as is expressed in the [Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention](#), which prompt Member States to guarantee the integration, consultation, and active involvement of local communities in the management, protection, and preservation of World Heritage Properties (see paragraph 12 of the *Operational Guidelines*).

In virtue of UNESCO's commitment to upholding these principles, ever since the relocation programme to be carried out in the archaeological park of Angkor was announced by the Cambodian authorities in 2022, the Organization has proactively engaged with all Human Rights protection mechanisms, including actively engaging with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Cambodia, Professor Vitit Muntarbhorn, supporting the efforts to map the full landscape of human rights in Cambodia, and in particular, to closely monitor the important matter of relocations in the Angkor archaeological park.

The UNESCO World Heritage Centre appreciates the inclusion of this matter in the Special Rapporteur's report, under point 29, which was presented in the course of the 57th session of the Human Rights Council and the Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia, held on 7 October 2024, which saw the participation of representatives from 25 countries and multiple NGOs involved in the protection of fundamental freedoms in Cambodia.

The report acknowledges the UNESCO's advocacy for the relocation programmes to be based on the principle of free, prior, and informed consent and prompting the World Heritage Committee to examine the matter of the relocation closely, to provide further guidance.

Following the announcement by the Royal Government of Cambodia of its decision to conduct a relocation programme in 2022, UNESCO has repeatedly and publicly called on the Government to ensure all activities operate in full respect of human rights, stressing the importance of guaranteeing that all relocations be voluntary, and categorically rejecting the use of forced evictions.

UNESCO reiterated its position in [official statement](#) on 15 November 2023.

As was reaffirmed on this occasion, the relocation programme has never been requested by UNESCO, nor has UNESCO ever been involved in its planning, establishment, and development. In these regards, UNESCO actively urged the Cambodian authorities to explicitly commit to preventing any instances of forced evictions in Angkor and establishing proper corrective measures to ensure the full respect of all human rights for those communities concerned, with the support of the International Coordinating Committee for Angkor (ICC-Angkor), an independent advisory committee co-chaired by France and Japan (see also Document [WHC/23/45.COM/7B.Add.2](#) and Decision [45 COM 7B.152](#) in this regard).

UNESCO has further reiterated the role of Angkor as a living World Heritage site. The presence of local communities, in fact, represented an integral aspect of the inclusion of the site on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1992, and the respect and preservation of their ancestral traditions and cultural practices constitute a priority in the site's management and conservation activities.

The call to adopt a human rights-based approach in the preservation of cultural heritage and UNESCO's commitment to prevent the violation of fundamental rights in the context of the safeguarding of the World Heritage Property of Angkor, were repeated to all Member States in the course of the [4th Intergovernmental Conference on Angkor](#), held on 15 November 2023.

In addition to this public advocacy, UNESCO has activated the mechanisms of the World Heritage Convention. Information regarding concerns and allegations of human rights

violations, including regarding abuse against local communities in and around World Heritage properties, may be relayed to the World Heritage Centre from any third party, triggering the Reactive Monitoring process (Paragraph 174 of the [Operational Guidelines](#)), through the presentation of state of conservations reports to the World Heritage Committee.

Following these allegations, and in view of the urgent need to address this important matter, UNESCO brought forward the date for Cambodia's submission of a national report on the state of conservation of the archaeological park of Angkor and required that particular attention be given to the specifics of the relocation programme, in order to respond to any human rights abuse allegations.

The report, which was submitted by the Cambodian authorities on 30 January 2024, was examined in the context of the 46th session of the World Heritage Committee, held in July 2024 in New Delhi.

Prior to this session, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre made publicly available the working documents for the World Heritage Committee. In the document concerning the overall state of conservation of World Heritage properties (Document [WHC/24/46.COM/7](#)), UNESCO highlighted that *"The World Heritage Centre and Advisory Bodies followed up on reports from the third parties of imminent planned and potentially forced relocation of the local communities living in some natural World Heritage properties, including allegations of serious human rights violations – in some instances against indigenous peoples. In each of these instances, the World Heritage Centre has contacted the State Party to request further information on these allegations. In other instances, authorities have embarked on a programme to relocate people that they consider illegal settlers from the protected areas.*

This prompted third parties to raise concerns about the criteria used to determine the rights of people to reside within the property and the conditions at the relocation sites. In such instances, state of conservation reports have been brought to the Committee to facilitate a better understanding of the proposed programmes or clarify regarding allegations of forced evictions. [...] it is recommended that States Parties to the Convention be requested to strengthen their efforts to adopt a rights-based approach and fully implement the World Heritage and Sustainable Development Policy 2015 and comply with the Operational Guidelines in accordance with international human rights standards, as also defined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights".

In the latest document concerning Angkor (Document [WHC/24/46.COM/7B.Add](#)), the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies make clear references to the concerns related to relocations and human rights in Angkor, including those raised by Amnesty International through their regular exchanges with UNESCO since 2022. The document notes that *"the State Party's report provides a comprehensive account of 'the management of illegal occupants' since inscription [...] [and] also illustrated the adverse impact of the illegal occupation on the property and the unsanitary conditions of these settlements. [...] In 2005, an expert mission and report addressed the challenges arising from illegal occupation. In 2008, Decision [32 COM 7B.65](#) recommended the application of regulations to avoid uncontrolled urban expansion, and enforcing existing laws regarding illegal occupation, unauthorised construction and development, and in 2014, Decision [38 COM 7B.8](#) noted the progress made by the State Party on this matter.*

The State Party should be encouraged to continue deploying its efforts to ensure the accuracy and effectiveness as well as communication on the on-going zoning regulation and management measures and the related relocation programme, making a clear

distinction between lawful inhabitants who should be involved in the management of the site and illegal occupants and take steps to prevent further illegal settlement inside the protected zones of the property. The Committee may wish to record that the rights of residents of 112 villages identified at the time of inscription in 1992 and their descendants and/or beneficiaries must be protected, in compliance with legal instruments, including Governmental Decision 70/SSR of September 2004 and that the relocation and the living conditions of the illegal occupants must comply with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)”.

Consequently, in Decision [46 COM 7](#), the Committee recalled “*the obligations of States Parties to ensure that the management of their World Heritage properties should follow a human rights-based approach in line with international human rights standards and norms*” and “*expresse[d] its utmost concern and strongly condemn[ed] all forms of human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples and local communities, including forced evictions, and reiterate[d] that such violations are unacceptable within the framework of the World Heritage Convention, urge[d] the States Parties concerned to urgently investigate allegations where such violations have been reported, and call[ed] upon States Parties to ensure equitable, inclusive and participatory governance mechanisms ensuring full respect of human rights, including the rights of Indigenous Peoples, as an integral part of the management of World Heritage properties”.*

At the same session, the Committee Members unanimously adopted Decision [46 COM 7B.31](#) regarding Angkor. It recommended that the State Party of Cambodia “*accurately and effectively communicate regarding the zoning regulations and the ongoing relocation programme to both national and local communities, notably by outlining [...] clear means of identifying inhabitants having the rights to live within the property [and] its commitment to ensuring that the conditions of relocated populations comply in all respects with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant human right normative instruments ratified by the State Party”.*

The Committee also requested that the State Party invite a joint World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS/ICCROM Reactive Monitoring mission to the property “to assess the overall state of conservation of the property, including management issues related to the areas from which populations were relocated, reflecting on appropriate measures to prevent ongoing illegal settlements and analysing the conditions of the relocated communities”. The Royal Government of Cambodia has agreed to the carrying out of this mission between 9 and 13 December 2024. Its findings and recommendations will be presented to the World Heritage Committee at its 47th session (Sofia, 6-16 July 2025).

With the aforementioned Decision, the Committee also requested that Cambodia submit to the World Heritage Centre, by 1 February 2025, an updated report on the state of conservation of the property and the implementation of its recent decisions for examination at its 47th session. In this framework, the World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies of the Committee would be keen to incorporate the findings of the Special Rapporteurs into their analysis for the working documents of the 47th session.

The UNESCO World Heritage Centre remains committed to closely monitoring the concerns raised by the relocation programme in Angkor, continuing to engage with the Cambodian government, as well as other UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other relevant actors working to uphold human rights and fundamental freedoms in Cambodia, and will continue to engage with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Cambodia, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

We would like to express our gratitude to the Special Rapporteurs for taking up this important issue, as we are thankful for the opportunity to further cooperate to ensure the respect of fundamental rights remains at the heart of the management policy implemented by the Cambodian authorities for this World Heritage site.

Thanking you for your engagement in favour of the communities that are at the heart of the shared heritage of humanity, I remain,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'L. Assomo', with a large, sweeping horizontal stroke above the name.

Lazare Eloundou Assomo
Director

cc: UNESCO Offices in Phnom Penh and Bangkok
UNESCO Liaison Office in Geneva