

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## **Demand Dignity for victims of land disputes and evictions**

Today Amnesty International is introducing its new global Demand Dignity campaign in Cambodia, to mark the launch of “Losing Ground”, a book by and about communities affected by forced evictions and land disputes.

The Demand Dignity campaign underlines that poverty is the world’s worst human rights crisis. Human rights abuses drive and deepen poverty. People living in poverty are excluded from the societies they live in, denied a say in processes that determine their own futures, and face violence and insecurity.

Respect for human rights demands inclusion and requires the recognition that everyone has the right to live in dignity, and the right to food, water, basic healthcare, education and shelter.

The Demand Dignity campaign draws attention to communities living in neighbourhoods defined as slums and the many human rights violations they face. There are more than 200,000 such communities, home to one billion people around the world.

In Angola, forced evictions have deprived thousands of families of their homes. Kenyan slum residents are excluded from planning processes that affect them and have limited access to basic services. People in Brazilian *favelas*, in particular women, face violence and insecurity. In Italy, the Roma, an ethnic minority group, are denied access to national health and other social services.

In Cambodia for the last two years Amnesty International has been focusing on forced evictions as one of the country’s most serious human rights violations today. The increasing number of land disputes; land confiscations; and industrial and urban redevelopment projects hurt almost exclusively people living in poverty.

Affected communities, including defenders of the right to housing, experience harassment at the hands of the authorities or people hired by private businesses. The rich and powerful are increasingly abusing the criminal justice system to silence communities taking a stand against land concessions or other opaque business deals affecting the land they live on or cultivate. Many poor and marginalized communities are living in fear from the institutions created to protect them, in particular the police and the courts. However, as public space for discussing forced evictions is shrinking, grassroots activists are increasingly coming together to raise common concerns.

In Cambodia and elsewhere, people living in poverty need to be able to engage in the processes that determine their future and Demand Dignity seeks to promote the space for the poor to tell their stories. Across the world, it brings together human rights activists who campaign against injustice and exclusion: in Spain, over 17,000 people have signed an Amnesty petition to the Cambodian authorities against forced evictions in Cambodia; in Australia, Amnesty members called on their own government to use their influence as a donor and development partner to stop the forced eviction of Group 78; on 30 May 2009, youth activists gathered in four cities in the Philippines calling on the Cambodian authorities to end forced evictions, and young Amnesty

members in Canada have drawn hundreds of colourful houses with messages of solidarity for the Spean Ches community forcibly evicted in April 2007.

Amnesty International has joined together with a network of Cambodian communities at risk and victims of forced eviction. Their stories, some of which are published in “Losing Ground”, show how people living in poverty are routinely excluded from decisions affecting them. But the book also demonstrates how affected communities are connecting with each other and making their voices heard more loudly.

While introducing the Demand Dignity campaign in Cambodia, Amnesty International is repeating its calls for an end to forced evictions and is asking others to join our call. We are also urging the Royal Government of Cambodia to introduce a moratorium on mass evictions until the legal framework and policies to protect the population against forced evictions are in place.

We urge the Cambodian government to ensure the safety of housing rights defenders – including the courageous people who have come forward with their experiences in “Losing Ground” – so they are able to act freely, without intimidation, harassment or violence in their work to campaign for housing rights.

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