

## PRESS RELEASE

The 1992 Professor Thorolf Rafto Prize for Human Rights will be awarded to:

PREAH MAHA GHOSANANDA, KAMPUCHEA

at 19.00 on the 4th of November 1992, at Den Nationale Scene in Bergen.

This year's laureate is a Buddhist spiritual leader who has just completed a 500-km reconciliation march from Thailand to Kampuchea, and the award ceremony will focus on this theme of reconciliation.

### THE PRIZEWINNER

Those who know him say that Preah Maha Ghosananda is a humble man with a strong personal charisma. He has an enormous appeal to ordinary people, who are the ones he primarily wishes to address, without regard to their background or political affiliations. As early as 1979 he began to speak of reconciliation in Thailand's refugee camps, in camps controlled by the Khmers Rouges and those controlled by others.

Preah Maha Ghosananda is the only living disciple of one of Kampuchea's best-known hermits, and also has an American education. He was born and grew up Khmer, but has an American passport as well. This has enabled him to work with Khmer refugees in Thailand. He has recently collected some of his reflections in a little book called "Step by Step" - on the way of reconciliation.

Preah Maha Ghosananda gets everywhere - an impulsive man who often exploits the element of surprise. One of his favourite aphorisms is that *"he who wishes to move forward must use both legs - wisdom and compassion"*. Recently he limped into a meeting with an official, who took the point at once. At a big European peace conference where he thought too much unimportant was being said, he surprised the gathering by saying only a few words on peace and reconciliation around the world. This had an effect; he is, as we said, a humble man who uses his life to embody deep respect for human life and human rights by building bridges of reconciliation where nothing but insoluble conflicts appear to exist.

### ON KAMPUCHEA

*"Each step is a prayer, each step is mindful, each step will build a bridge"*, said Preah Maha Ghosananda before he set on the Dhamma Yatra, the nearly 500-km reconciliation march from the Thai frontier town of Aranyaprathet in Thailand to the Khmer capital of Phnom Penh, which took place between the 13th of April and the 16th of May this year.

He knows what he is talking about, this Khmer Buddhist spiritual leader. As early as 1979, when hundreds of thousands of Khmers had fled to Thailand after the fall of the Khmers Rouges regime, he played an active role in comforting them and binding their wounds. Then as now the key word was reconciliation. Only the scale has changed; now it is the entire nation of Kampuchea that needs to have its wounds bound. In both the literal and the metaphorical senses of the word, Kampuchea has the world's most mutilated population. Over 50,000 people are waiting for artificial legs. First American carpet-bombing during the Vietnam War, then the world's most collectivised and totalitarian society under the Khmers Rouges and their Chinese backers, and finally a decade of occupation by the Vietnamese, who were Soviet clients. Pawns on the Great Powers' chessboard, war

both foreign and civil; the fabric of society in ruins, and even worse, a nation with deep, open and bleeding wounds everywhere, from the social network down to the smallest family. Apart from material losses, everybody has lost someone dear to them.

On the 23rd of October 1991 a peace accord was signed by the last decade's combatants: a communist government installed by Vietnam and propped up by a Vietnamese army of occupation, and the three opposition groupings which have represented the country in the UN: the Khmers Rouges and two non-communist groups led by Prince Sihanouk and his former minister Son San. When the Vietnamese invaded Kampuchea at the end of 1978, they were welcomed by the great majority of the people as liberators. The Khmers Rouges were hated for their mass murders and their tormenting of the people by forced labour, starvation rations and virtual absence of medical care.

The peace treaty was brokered by the five permanent members of the Security Council, of which the USA, China and the former Soviet Union carry a great responsibility for Kampuchea's destruction. In the same way as, after the Vietnamese invasion and the expulsion of the Khmers Rouges, the UN declared that the fallen regime's genocide was Kampuchea's internal affair and a matter for the Khmers themselves, the peace treaty says only that the destructiveness of the previous period - when the Khmers Rouges were in power - must not be allowed to return, without prescribing any clear measures to stop this happening. To some extent the Khmers Rouges have been "sanitised" by the UN, and their leaders have returned to the capital as part of the transitional government.

The peace treaty includes provisions for the repatriation of the nearly 400,000 people who have fled to Thailand. The precondition is that this repatriation occurs in parallel with the implementation of the rest of the peace plan. This includes the observance of the cease-fire, the disarmament of the great majority of the various groups' soldiers, and UN supervision of human rights, so that free elections can be held for a new government.

Almost everybody to be repatriated wants to settle in the western part of the country, on the grounds that the soil here is very fertile. But they admit that the primary reason is proximity to Thailand in case they need to escape once more. More than half the fields they want to return to have been mined. It is not thought that the mines can be cleared in the first few years, for there are millions of mines in the country and a minimal mine clearance capability.

There are almost 200,000 displaced people within the country itself in consequence of the war. Neither the UN nor any other international organisation with the money feels any need to help them go home. Material resources and trained personnel are generally scarce, and the question is whether the repatriation ought not to wait a few years, until we can begin to see the contours of a harmonious development. Up to now not even the cease-fire has been respected by all parties, and certain areas are bordering on anarchy. Because of financial difficulties, the UN's presence on the ground is much thinner than it was designed to be.

Dhamma Yatra was bigger than the organisers dreamt. Not only was the reconciliation march followed by several hundred people - sometimes more than a thousand - for shorter or longer stretches, met everywhere with eager anticipation and joy, and given national media attention for the entire month it lasted - but first and foremost it showed that, despite everything this people has been through, the dream and the hope of peace and reconciliation is still alive.