

US funds courses for Chams

By Jon Bugge

The US has started funding training courses among Cambodia's Cham Muslim community in an effort to block inroads by Islamic fundamentalists in the traditionally moderate sect. Cham leaders participated in a recent workshop at the Nurol Ishan Mosque in Phnom Penh sponsored by the American Embassy on December 4.

"Muslims, as well as non-Muslims, in Cambodia love peace and are satisfied with democracy," said Y Sary, president of the Cambodian Islamic Development Community (CIDC).

The workshop coached trainers how to pass on their knowledge of human rights and democracy to Cham communities in the provinces. The emphasis is on anti-terrorism, said Sep Zakariya, an administrator at CIDC.

Using a participatory approach, the training manual is written to make a practical impact in the provinces by tackling poverty and ignorance seen as the root cause for the spread of militant extremist beliefs.

Twenty-two trainers attended the seminar. All of them were men.

The Cambodian government has praised the American initiative as part of its support for the US war on terror. The workshop was funded by a grant of \$25,000 from the US government.

Chea Savreourn, Minister of the Ministry of Cults and Religions and a Cham Muslim, said the government was intent on educating people about human rights and terrorism. He attended the opening ceremony along with representatives from the embassies of the US, Britain, Malaysia and Brunei.

The meeting's message of cooperation was echoed by US Embassy spokesperson Heide Bronke, who invoked President George W Bush's message to all Muslims during their holiest time of their year, Eid al-Fitr, the breaking of the fast of the holy month of Ramadan.

She spoke of "working together to advance peace and mutual understanding".

The US embassy has given grants to two local Islamic NGOs, CIDC and the Cambodian Islamic Youth Association, to promote human rights and democracy within their communities, according to Bronke.

Abdul Hamid Abas, first secretary at the Embassy of Brunei, said the project was an important step to ensure that Muslims and non-Muslims alike receive access to education, health care and reasonable living standards. He speculated that extreme poverty could encourage terrorism, although Cambodia might be a special case.

"There may be a link but it is not necessarily the same in Cambodia [as in the rest of the region]," he said. "They are really poor and do not have the time to commit terrorism. They are just trying to survive."