

ADB still puzzled by controversial letter

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THE Asian Development Bank has still not been able to "definitively confirm" the authenticity of a letter claiming that consultants working for it urged the government to crack down on NGOs critical of a project it is funding, although the letter is allegedly signed by a member of its own board of governors.

"Despite ADB's best efforts, it has not been able to definitively confirm the letter's authenticity," it told the *Post* yesterday in response to questions about the content of discussions it said it had with "the highest levels of government" about the letter.

The letter, allegedly from Deputy Prime Minister Keat Chhon to Prime Minister Hun Sen, was leaked to news outlets earlier this week. It contains complaints from unnamed ADB consultants about NGOs critical of the resettlement impacts of the US\$141 million railway rehabilitation project the ADB and AusAID are funding.

Keat Chhon, who is also the minister of economy and finance, is a member of the ADB's board of governors. His ministry also oversees the ADB's activities in Cambodia.

The ADB said its investigation into allegations of staff misconduct found no wrong-

doing. Since the investigation was completed earlier this month "no additional evidence of possible consultant misconduct, beyond a photo image of the letter, has ever been provided by any party", the ADB said yesterday.

A photocopy of photographs of the letter and an accompanying translation were received by the *Post* on Monday. The translation accuses "ignorant foreign NGOs" of inciting people affected by the railway project "to file complaints", and claims ADB consultants urged government officials to clamp down on the NGOs.

The letter was sent on June 17 and two days later Hun Sen allegedly approved its recommendations to take action against the NGOs, as well as speed up the review and implementation of the draft law on associations and NGOs.

In early August, land rights NGO Sahmakum Teang Tnaut was suspended for five months, while Bridges Across Borders Cambodia and NGO Forum received warnings from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

All three had signed an October 2010 letter to ADB's president calling for a suspension of loans for the railway project until resettlement issues were dealt with. Government officials have repeatedly declined to comment on the letter. ■