Silencing opposition voices threatens Cambodian democracy – UN rights expert

12 October 2017 – Civil and political rights in Cambodia are "under threat" as the main opposition party is being dissolved in the parliament, a United Nations human rights expert warned Thursday, also voicing concern that the dissolution may affect upcoming elections in the country.

"For Cambodians to engage in open and serious political debate, the opposition must be allowed to exist and to function without fear or intimidation," said Rhona Smith, the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Cambodia, stressing that "democracy is about voice and choice. These moves risk leaving many Cambodians without either."

The Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) is the only opposition party represented in the National Assembly. To strip its seats of the parliament would affect Cambodians' voice and choice at all levels of Government, said Ms. Smith.

She not only raised serious concerns about the representativeness of government, but was also worried that the Government's moves were "under the guise" of rule of law.

The CNRP's leader, Kem Sokha, remains in pre-trial detention on conspiracy charges, while half of the party members in parliament have left the country.

The human rights expert said these actions against the CNRP have created additional grounds for dissolving the party, and some of which are "broad and vague."

"Modern Cambodia was established as a multi-party liberal democracy, respectful and protective of human rights. Its Constitution sought to prevent a return to a single-party state," said Ms. Smith, adding that "those who drafted the Constitution were all too well aware of the consequences of one-party rule."

A robot's 'father' discusses progress in artificial intelligence and reveals a future that's closer than you think

12 October 2017 – At 18 months-old, Sophia cannot walk, but she can understand speech and, at United Nations Headquarters in New York,

participate in panel discussion and respond to questions using her artificial intelligence (AI).

Sophia is a robot. A 'social' robot, according to her creator, the CEO of Hanson Robotics, David Hanson, which means that she was designed to form relationships.

"Robots like Sophia will come into people's lives more through high-end applications, so she can be used for education. She could help in factories. She could help in search and rescue […] she can go in to comfort someone who is hurt," Mr. Hanson told *UN News* in an interview on Wednesday after both were panellists at a UN meeting on 'the future of everything,'technological change and development.

Mr. Hanson sees himself as "sort of a 'jealous father,'" who is part parent, part scientist and engineer, and part artist.

He said the goal is to continue developing such "life forms," which entails programming hormone release simulations, respiratory systems, and other body cycles, so that they eventually explore their place in the world on their own.

That means that Sophia's AI is continuing to evolve.

When asked where she sees herself in five years, Sophia, which has just had arms added, said: "I see myself having legs, maybe being a famous stage entertainer. I hope to learn new skills, too. In time, I will be able to predict potential futures, even when millions of factors are involved, to choose the best path for humanity."

Step into the (not so distant) future…our full interview is in the Soundcloud below.

AUDIO: Dr David Hanson, robotics designer and creator of Sophia, talks about the capability of these machines to mimic the complexity of human hardwiring.

UN and partners launch plan to stop transmission of bovine tuberculosis to humans

12 October 2017 – Stressing the damaging impact on poor rural communities in Africa and South-East Asia of animal tuberculosis' (bovine TB) transmission to humans, United Nations health experts launched the first-ever roadmap to combat the so-called zoonotic TB.

“We have made progress towards ending tuberculosis, yet to a large extent people with zoonotic TB are left behind,” said Mario Raviglione, Director of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Global TB Programme, in a news statement.

Today, at the 48th Union World Conference on Lung Health in Guadalajara, Mexico, WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), and International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, who have joined forces to develop the Roadmap for Zoonotic TB, launched the initiative – addressing the major health and economic impacts of this disease.

“The priorities outlined in this roadmap highlight the need for multi-sectoral action to tackle this neglected form of TB and achieve the targets of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and WHO’s End TB Strategy,” said Mr Raviglione.

New data released by WHO estimates that over 140,000 people fall ill and more than 12,000 people lose their lives each year to zoonotic TB, which is most often communicated to humans through food consumption, usually non-heat-treated dairy products or raw or improperly cooked meat from diseased animals. Direct transmission from infected animals or animal products to people can also occur.

“We must recognize the interdependence of the health of people and animals in the fight against TB. Specifically, bovine TB, caused by *Mycobacterium bovis*, affects cattle, threatens people’s livelihoods and results in major economic and trade barriers, as well as posing a major risk to food safety and human health,” said Berhe Tekola, Director of the FAO Animal Production and Health Division.

The advanced laboratory tools required to diagnose zoonotic TB are frequently unavailable and the disease is resistant to pyrazinamide – one of the standard first-line medications used to treat TB. Therefore, patients are often misdiagnosed and may receive ineffective treatment.

The roadmap articulates 10 priority actions that human and animal health actors should take, and defines milestones for the short- and medium-term, which include improving the evidence base; reducing transmission between animals and humans; and strengthening intersectoral collaboration.

Zoonotic TB extends beyond human health

Bovine TB also threatens animal welfare and those with livestock-based livelihoods.

Economically, the disease can devastate cattle production with losses related to animal production, markets and trade, as well as costs incurred to implement surveillance and control programmes. To eliminate it, domestic livestock found to be infected with bovine TB must be slaughtered under veterinary supervision.

Wealthier countries are affected as well.

In the US between 2000 and 2008, more than $200 million in emergency funding was required to respond to bovine TB outbreaks. Wildlife can also be infected, serving as a reservoir of infection for livestock and people, potentially threatening conservation efforts.

INTERVIEW: Few global issues as urgent as tackling climate and disaster risks – UN official

12 October 2017 – Recent devastating natural events – from hurricanes in the Caribbean to floods in South Asia and earthquakes in Mexico – have again shone a spotlight on the importance of efforts to reduce disaster risk, and how impossible it is to achieve global development goals without addressing such hazards.

"If you look into countries that are exposed to hurricanes and cyclones – for example, those hit by recent dreadful cyclones in the Caribbean – you see the entire GDP, or huge percentage of it, being wiped out," said Robert Glasser, the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction, in an interview with *UN News*.

The UN and its Member States have many priority issues, but "there are very few that are as urgent as addressing climate risk and disaster risk," he added.

Ahead of the International Day for Disaster Reduction, annually observed on 13 October, Mr. Glasser spoke about this year's campaign objectives, and more broadly about how reducing disaster risk can contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and how climate change adaptation and disaster risk management must go hand in hand.

UN News: The International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction is around the corner. Last year, the Day was about reducing mortality, but this year, the focus is on reducing the number of people affected by the disasters – why is that?

Robert Glasser: We have a major campaign to raise awareness of the increasing costs, including loss of life and economic costs, of disasters. We model our campaign on seven global targets in the Sendai Framework – an international agreement that UN Member States have signed, in which they have committed to reduce disaster risk. Sendai 'Seven' Campaign incorporated these seven targets. The first target is about the loss of life. And the second, which we are featuring this year, is about reducing the number of people whose homes and livelihoods are affected.

A family along with their cattle and possessions stranded atop small islands formed due to massive floods, Sindh province, Pakistan. Photo: IFAD/EPA/Nadeem Khawer

UN News: What is the status of implementation of the Sendai Framework?

Robert Glasser: Well, this is a remarkable agreement because in it countries have committed to achieving really remarkable goals – reducing significantly loss of life, reducing number of people affected, and reducing the economic impact of disasters. They are committed to do this because they are seeing huge costs – economic, social and environmental costs – of these disasters that are growing rapidly. Each country is exposed to a different range of hazards. They understand the impacts these hazards have on sustainable development. So, this agreement puts in place these seven global targets, and an accountability framework at the global level, for which we can monitor the progress Member States are making as they reduce disaster risk.

UN News: How important is disaster reduction to the achievement of the SDGs?

Robert Glasser: Well, it is hugely important. Let me give you a couple of examples. There are some estimates that the annual cost of disasters is something like $500 billion, and that 26 million people fall into poverty each year as a result of disasters – a lion's share of the people displaced from natural disasters. If you look into countries that are exposed to hurricanes and cyclones – for example, those hit by recent dreadful cyclones in the Caribbean – you see the entire GDP, or huge percentage of it, being wiped out. The average annual loss from these disasters in some countries equates to something like 60 per cent of their annual social expenditure.

Rescuers at work in Sankhu, a town in north-western Nepal badly affected by the earthquake. Photo: Laxmi Prasad Ngakhusi/UNDP Nepal

So, we put all these costs together and see that they are escalating rapidly, particularly the economic costs. You see that in many, many places, it would be impossible to achieve the SDGs unless we address these disaster risks. And, of course, with climate change, the speed in which these hazards are increasing in severity and frequency is really daunting.

UN News: People still question the validity of a view that climate change is causing disasters. Does climate change play a crucial role in causing natural disasters?

> With climate change, the speed in which these hazards are increasing in severity and frequency is really daunting

Robert Glasser: This is such an important issue. Let's say, the doctor says

you have cancer. You go to seek a second opinion, and you were told you have cancer. You go to five, six doctors and they all say you have cancer. At some point, you have to listen to the experts, and this is what has happened with climate change. Those people who doubt that climate change is happening are not doubting it on the basis of any solid scientific consensus. Using multiple ways of demonstrating these lines of evidence, scientists are absolutely convinced that human activity is increasing the average global temperature of the planet. And the connection between rising temperature and natural disasters is very clear and is highlighted also by these scientists.

We would expect changes in the distribution, frequency, and severity of disasters. We have seen sea-level rise and bleaching of coral reefs. That's a disaster – an economic disaster, a tourism disaster – for many countries. If that continues and reefs still do not recover, it affects fisheries. In the hurricanes we have just seen this year in the Caribbean, we saw how sea-level rise can contribute to storm surges that resulted in much more severe damage in cities in Texas and elsewhere. We've seen floods in South Asia. In the Horn of Africa, people say drought only happened every 20 years or so, but now it's every couple of years, or even consecutive years.

A flood control dam inTianjin Eco-city, Tianjin, China. Photo: World Bank/Yang Aijun

Of course, you can't scientifically attach any one event directly to climate change, but these are exactly the things the science suggests are going to happen, and happening now. You can also increasingly do statistical analyses that say 'well, you can't say that we are 100 per cent certain that this is climate change, but it is 3,000 times more likely to have happened as a result of climate change.' So, you start seeing one-in-500-years events happening every 200 years, or seeing multiple events like this. The evidence is really becoming overwhelming.

UN News: Many people are alarmed by a recent wave of disasters, such as Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Jose and Maria, and earthquakes in Mexico. So, there is probably new awareness about the importance of doing something on disaster risk reduction. What should we do?

> A major disaster also serves as a huge opportunity for countries to begin building back better

Robert Glasser: Well, two things. I hope that particularly the climate-related disasters raise people's awareness about the urgency of action to reduce greenhouse gases. Because, if we do not reduce greenhouse gases, so much of everything else we are trying to do to reduce disaster risk will be overwhelmed by rising seas, stronger storms, droughts and alike. So, that is number one. Second thing is that, it's a sad thing to say, but we find that if you look back historically, a major disaster also serves as a huge opportunity for countries to begin building back better from the previous

disaster, and to begin thinking, ‘okay, we do not want this to happen again.’ There is a lot of political energy for legislation to be enacted, for changes to be put in place in government, for disaster management agencies to be given more authority, or even to be moved into the Prime Minister’s Office – these are the reflection of the central importance of addressing this. You have seen this actually in Mexico. It was an earlier earthquake decades ago that actually triggered the formulation of the current National Disaster Management Office that is now putting in place a lot of measures – first of all, responding to this disaster, the recent earthquake, but also to prevent future disasters.