

Beijing Report

Cambodia's athletes seek a better playing field

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Cambodia sought money to help send athletes to 2008 Summer Olympics
- Asian nation has had to rebuild infrastructure since rule of Khmer Rouge
- Country is pegged for rapid economic growth in coming years

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By Rebecca Byerly For CNN

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (CNN) – Without proper food, shoes, or support from his government, Hem Bunting, the Cambodian Olympic marathon competitor, prepared for the Olympics and hoped for international support in late July.



Hem Bunting: With proper support, Cambodia could be competitive in international sports.

"It is hard to compete at an Olympic level when you do not get any support from the government," panted Bunting, 25, who had just run intervals on the bleachers of the dilapidated Olympic stadium in the capital.

A week before the four Cambodian athletes were scheduled to attend the opening of the Olympic Games, the President of the National Olympic Committee of Cambodia, Dr. Thong Kohn, appealed to all companies, suppliers, and donors for the \$18,423 needed to send the four athletes and 10 supporters to the games in Beijing. The list included funds for shoes, Olympic uniforms, and pocket money.

A representative of the National Olympic Committee of Cambodia said there was insufficient money for sports. Programs for sports would develop as education in the country improved.

"We need to improve and reform several sectors in Cambodia's education programs," explained Sambath Sothea, who is in charge of the Sports Marketing Program for the Cambodian Olympic Team.

"Part of this improvement should be in sports education, which is an important part of the personal development of young people who are the future of our nation. People have the tendency to forget Cambodia is a nation on the rise and need to give it some time to grow."

Once referred to as the Pearl of Asia, Cambodia's sports programs, economy, and infrastructure were destroyed during the Khmer Rouge reign, where it is estimated that 1.5 million people were killed between 1975 and 1979. The country has only now begun to emerge on the global market, with the country's first stock exchange scheduled to start in 2009.

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Bunting believed the only way sports would develop was through private donors.

"If we could get sponsored, we could go somewhere with sports in Cambodia, but the government is not going to support us because they are busy with other things," said the runner, whose best marathon time

of 2 hours 26 minutes, 28 seconds placed him second at the Sea Games, a competition held among South East Asian countries.

"I work really hard but do not even have the basic things I need, like nutritious food to eat or clothes for training." Bunting ran on the busy streets of the capital without proper running shoes until the Australian New Zealand Bank (ANZ) sponsored him.

Sothea believed the partnership between the public and private sector was critical for the development of sports in the country.

"The government needs to reform sports and give it a more reliable structure," said Sothea who earned his law degree in France. "The private sector will be responsible for making investments."

In the wake of recent elections, which ushered in relative peace and political stability, major investment companies have flocked to Cambodia. Some of these investors considered sports a potential investment opportunity.

"From supporting the training and finances of an Olympic athlete to building industrial parks and helping Cambodia become a leading rice exporter, we want to invest in areas that Cambodians take pride in," said Marvin Yeo, the co-founder of Frontier Investment Partners. Yeo's firm planned to devote over \$250 million to an array of areas, which include real estate, infrastructure, manufacturing, and agriculture throughout the next decade.

Another investor was also hopeful about Cambodia's future.

"The next five years will be the time investment takes off in Cambodia and the country starts to put itself on

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the map," explained Douglas Clayton, founder of Leopard Capital, which manages a private equity fund that invests in Cambodia. "You will see a major change in the country, and things like sports, which have been overlooked because of the lack of government support, may start to receive some funding from the private sector."

From farming to development

The growing interest in sports is another indicator of the country's aptitude for development. Cambodia has begun to see a generation that has taken an avid interest in their educations and future careers.

"Development is good for Cambodia," said Bunting, whose village got electricity only two years ago. "I would not have gotten a good education if it had not been for the foreigners who came to my village and started a school."

Though his parents were poor, uneducated rice farmers, Bunting studied development at Cambodia University and wanted to work with foreign organizations in the remote areas of the country to improve education and infrastructure. His talent for running was first discovered when he competed in a national competition in Phnom Penh several years ago.

Bunting is part of the growing number of youths who are becoming more socially aware in Cambodia.

"The days of the Khmer Rouge are over now, and the youth in Cambodia face different challenges, like how to become socially conscious and have a voice in the development of their country," said Long Kat, 35, the director of Youth for Peace in Cambodia.

While 50 percent of the country's population is under 25, and young people between the ages of 18 and 30 comprise more than 50 percent of eligible voters, they have only recently begun to engage in politics and their communities.

"Cambodia is not competitive in sports, education, or most jobs right now because we don't have any competition and little opportunity in the country," said Bunting. "But I think with the right support this could change."

Bunting said education and employment are the greatest concerns of his generation.

Investment in education

While both of these areas are projected to improve, some individuals remain skeptical of the many flaws that remain in the system. Investors pour in, but some intellectuals wonder what exactly is being done to improve the educational system and how this will impact the alarmingly high rate of unemployment.

"I lived in Cambodia for five years in the early 90's," exclaimed Clodagh O'Brian, who worked for an NGO in the capital at that time. "The city has transformed with buildings, paved roads, and soon skyscrapers. But, what has not changed that much are the schools. I would like to know how much investment is going back in to education."

Reports of corruption and bribes in schools are common, and children have limited opportunities in the current educational system. Education is one of the areas that Yeo and Clayton claim will improve as a result of the incoming investments.

"You will see growth in some sectors of education," said Clayton, who has worked in Asia over 20 years. "For example, as investors build more hotels in the country, others may start to invest in hotel management schools and language schools. Cambodia will gradually produce more skilled English-speaking workers."

Despite the difficulties posed by the poor infrastructure and the many challenges he faces, Bunting remained optimistic about Cambodia's future. "Being an athlete and just trying to live in Cambodia is not easy," sighed Bunting. "But, I think in several years, it could get better."

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Sothea agreed.

"The important thing is not to win, but to take part," quoted Sambeth, who borrowed the philosophy from Baron Pierre De Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee. "Instead of complaining about where Cambodia is, we need to have a collective vision for where the country is going. Let's meet up again eight years from now and see where Cambodia and her athletes are." [E-mail to a friend](#) [Mix it](#) [Share](#)

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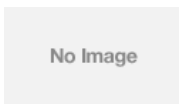
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