Remarks by Francesca Erdelmann, Country Director World Food Programme

on behalf of the United Nations group on

food security and livelihoods support for returning migrants.

22 April 2020

Ministry of Interior

Samdech Krolahom Sar Kheng, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Interior

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning.

Thank you, excellency Chou Bun Eng, for stressing the importance of food security and livelihoods for returning migrants, their families and communities during our recent consultations. Households whose family members migrated abroad or within Cambodia rely heavily on remittances to cover their daily expenditures. In 2016, a UN survey found that regular in-country income makes up some 61% of migrant households’ annual expenditure with the remaining 39% covered by remittances and loans. The loss of this income can have dramatic impact on the food security of the household. The possibility that this income gap will last for extended time due to the far-reaching impacts of COVID19 puts considerable strain on household expenditures. It is therefore important to consider the short-term food needs of the returning migrants and their families, while also exploring medium to long term solutions that secure households’ purchasing power and opportunities for alternative livelihoods. Their ability to access affordable, nutritious foods in local markets will be critical for longer term nutritional wellbeing, particularly for young children, adolescents, and pregnant women in their households.

When reviewing appropriate strategies, the World Food Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization and other UN organizations recognize that it is important that we understand the needs of the households to which the migrants return and those of neighbouring families within their communities. It is of course also important to more accurately know where in the provinces the returning migrants are resettling. While exploring the possibilities to address migrants’ specific needs, the greater COVID19 impact on the country also calls on us to elaborate broader response mechanisms in support of most vulnerable Cambodians, which can be inclusive of migrant households’ needs. Programmes need to be fair and equitable to all and avoid unintended stigma to few.

No response can be formulated without adequate data. Therefore, the first priority is to gather relevant information on migrants’ resettlement destinations with support from provincial leadership and NCDM; analyse the demographic, livelihood and vulnerability characteristics of their families using existing NIS data and collecting new information; and explore the impact of COVID19 on food systems and rural livelihoods more broadly in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture.

Secondly, targeted support mechanisms could be formulated in the form of basic resettlement packages as well as the inclusion of migrant households in existing support programmes in their communities. We are available to assist in the possible deployment of the national food reserve if the Government would wish to do so, while also working with Civil Society platforms to inventorize the collective capacities of hundreds of NGOs working with local communities which could proactively engage with migrant households for both immediate and longer term support.

Thirdly, the wellbeing of returning migrants and their households needs to be viewed in context of measures to provide social and economic stability to the country as a whole, through food systems and value chain measures and market stimulants; social assistance measures that protect households from negative coping mechanisms and promote their investments in new livelihood opportunities; and by enabling commune initiatives that are tailored to the specific needs, means and opportunities of the community. Of course, migrants’ eventual return to safe and fair work opportunities abroad and elsewhere in Cambodia will benefit from training in new skills and vocations, offering them greater access to a diversifying labour market.

Excellencies, we are honoured by the Ministry of Interior’s trust in the United Nations to work with you to support the people of Cambodia through this challenging time. This is certainly a team effort, as many of the activities I just mentioned lie within the mandated work of many of you present here today. We look forward to gaining greater insights in your plans, your opportunities and challenges so that we can actively position ourselves to partner with you in this important task.

Thank you.