

Release Imprisoned Activists and End Crackdown Against Young Cambodians

9 September 2020

We, the undersigned civil society groups, condemn the arrests of seven young activists over the past few days, and call for all charges against those imprisoned to be dropped immediately. We urge the government to end its campaign of fear and repression against peaceful youth and environmental human rights defenders, and ensure the rights of the Cambodian people to peacefully advocate for themselves, their families and their communities are respected.

On Monday September 7 Khmer Thavrak youth group member Tha Lavy, 19, was arrested while stepping out of a tuk-tuk at Phnom Penh's Freedom Park on his way to a peaceful demonstration at the designated protest space calling for the release of imprisoned union leader Rong Chhun. Another Khmer Thavrak member, Eng Malai, was followed by police from the protest and arrested that same evening after leaving the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights.

Their detention followed the arrests on Thursday September 3 of three young environmental activists. The trio were planning a one-woman march to raise awareness about the filling-in of Boeung Tamok lake in the capital's north. Their names are Long Kunthea, Phoung Keorasmey and Thun Ratha. On Sunday September 6 the three were charged with incitement to commit a felony or disturb social order under Articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code and imprisoned. These charges carry a sentence of up to two years in prison. The youngest, Keorasmey, is just 19 years old.

Also on Sunday September 6, ordained Buddhist monk Koet Saray and Khmer Student Intelligent League Association vice-president Mean Prommony were arrested by police over plans for a peaceful assembly in Freedom Park to call for the release of union leader Rong Chhun, Khmer Win Party president Soung Sophorn and Khmer Thavrak members Chhoeun Daravy and Hun Vannak following their arrests in August. Venerable Saray was defrocked on Monday afternoon, and both men were also charged with incitement and sent to pre-trial detention in Phnom Penh's Correctional Centre 1.

Police also arrested 22-year-old rapper Kea Sokun in Siem Reap on Friday September 4. He was charged the next day with incitement in connection with a four-month-old song "Dey Khmer" – Khmer Land. The song, which had more than 1.5 million views on YouTube as of his arrest, spoke about Cambodia's borders. Sokun remains in pre-trial detention in Siem Reap.

This latest wave of arrests follows the detention of six more people who were charged with incitement and imprisoned in August while also calling for Rong Chhun's release. They included Chum Puthy, Chhoung Pheng, Sar Kanika, Chhoeun Daravy, Hun Vannak and Soung Sophorn.

The Interior Ministry released a statement on Monday instructing authorities to take legal action against members of the Khmer Thavrak youth group and Mother Nature Cambodia environmental movement, accusing the groups of causing social chaos. With the detention of Malai and Lavy, a total of ten people have so far been arrested for participating in peaceful demonstrations calling for Rong Chhun's release.

We are extremely concerned about the use of incitement charges as a weapon to silence civil debate and strangle civic engagement. We call on the government to immediately drop all charges against the activists it has arrested and to halt its crackdown against youth and environmental groups.

This joint statement is endorsed by;

1. Activities for Environment Community (AEC)
2. Affiliated Network for Social Accountability (ANSA)
3. Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT)
4. Building and Wood Workers Trade Union Federation of Cambodia (BWTUC)
5. Building Community Voices (BCV)
6. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
7. Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation (CFSWF)
8. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
9. Cambodian Informal Economy Workers Association (CIWA)
10. Cambodia's Independent Civil Servants Association (CICA)
11. Cambodian Institute for Democracy (CID)
12. Cambodian Labor Confederation (CLC)
13. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
14. Cambodian Tourism and Service Workers Federation (CTSWF)
15. Cambodian Volunteers for Society (CVS)
16. Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
17. Cambodia Tourism Workers Union Federation (CTWUF)
18. Cambodia Youth and Monk Network (CYMN)
19. Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL)
20. Coalition for Integrity and Social Accountability (CISA)
21. Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (C.CAWDU)
22. Coalition of Cambodian Farmers Community Association (CCFC)
23. Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL)
24. Community Peace-Building Network (CPN)
25. Equitable Cambodia (EC)
26. Free Trade Union of Workers of Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC)
27. Indradevi Association (IDA)
28. Khmer Kampuchea Krom For Human Rights and Development Association (KKKHRDA)
29. Labour Right Supported Union Khmer Employee of Nagaworld (L.R.S.U)
30. Neutral and Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (NICFEC)
31. Peace Bridge Organisation (PBO)
32. People Center for Development and Peace (PDP)
33. Ponlok Khmer (PKH)
34. Rural Cambodia Technological Support Organisation (RCTSO)
35. Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT)
36. Social Action for Community and Development (SACD)
37. The Cambodian Center for the Protection of Children's Rights (CCPCR)
38. Transparency International Cambodia (TI)
39. Youth Resources Development Program (YRDP)