

## **Cambodia: The Government should end its systematic harassment of activists and human rights defenders**

(Bangkok, 16 September 2020) – The arrests of human rights defenders (HRDs) and activists in Cambodia demonstrate the increasingly hostile climate against HRDs, and the Cambodian government’s relentless assault against the fundamental rights of its people, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) said in a statement today.

On 3 September, three staff members of the environmental NGO, Mother Nature, namely Thun Ratha, Long Kunthea and Phuong Keorasmey, were arrested in Phnom Penh and charged with incitement to felony for planning a peaceful assembly to express concerns on a military base project in the Bueng Ta-mouk lake, which had already been subject to multiple development projects.<sup>1</sup>

On 6 September, authorities also arrested ordained Buddhist monk Koet Saray and Mean Prommony of the Khmer Student Intelligent League Association for planning a demonstration calling for the release of union leader Rong Chhun.

‘These continuous arrests and the use of judicial harassment against human rights defenders and activists in Cambodia send a chilling message to dissidents, and demonstrate how its civic space has closed under Hun Sen’s regime. Cambodia should immediately release the detained human rights defenders, drop all pending charges against them and end the systematic harassment and intimidation of all dissenters,’ said Shamini Darshni Kaliemuthu, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

In recent months, the Government has shown an increasing intolerance against dissent, escalating its attacks against HRDs, critics, and relatives of the banned political party Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). Union leader and critic Rong Chhun was arrested in late July and charged with incitement for the remarks he made over land infringement in the Cambodia-Vietnam border that caused farmers to lose land.<sup>2</sup> Authorities have violently suppressed protests by relatives of CNRP members who have called for their release.

Since Rong Chhun’s arrest, the United Nations office has documented the arrests of 24 activists, with 12 still in detention. These mostly comprise young people planning or taking part in peaceful assemblies or protests. Those who have been released were reportedly made to sign statements under duress, to cease human right activities.<sup>3</sup> The Government also denounced two civil society organisations, Mother Nature and youth activist group Khmer Thavrak, as non-legitimate organisations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/flashnews.php?perm=280>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/cambodian-union-leader-arrested-incitement>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/newsevents/pages/displaynews.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://vodenglish.news/authorities-declare-protest-groups-illegal-as-more-activists-arrested/>

Hun Sen's Government has systematically cracked down on civic space, shutting down media organisations, banning the CNRP, and attacking HRDs and civil society organisations. Its use of repressive laws such as the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO) has severely limited the capacity of CSOs to promote human rights advocacy, and created a chilling effect for the general public.

The passage of the Emergency Decree with its overbroad provisions, and the Government's efforts to pass a public order law, would only further criminalise legitimate actions, in an environment where basic liberties are already severely curtailed.

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Government of Cambodia to address these long-standing human rights concerns, and to end its crackdown on civic space. Human rights defenders and activists should not have to face intimidation and reprisals for merely advocating for fundamental freedoms.

'With Cambodia's continuous failure to end its systematic intimidation of civil society, the international community has the duty to ensure Cambodia is in its agenda,' concluded Shamini.

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About FORUM-ASIA: The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a Bangkok-based regional network of 81 member organisations across 21 Asian countries, with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity-development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has sub-regional offices in Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu. [www.forumasia.org](http://www.forumasia.org)

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