ILLEGAL ARRESTS & SOCIAL AFFAIRS CENTERS:
TIME FOR GOVT ACTION, NOT MORE DENIALS

"This is to mark that I lived in terror under oppression," reads this message scrawled by a detainee on a detention room wall at Prey Speu Social Affairs Center.

LICADHO deplores the government’s continued failure to take proper action to investigate and punish systematic abuses committed at the Prey Speu and Koh Kor Social Affairs Centers, and to ensure that such abuses cannot occur again.

The Ministry of Social Affairs, in a statement dated November 4 and published in Rasmei Kampuchea newspaper on November 6, repeated its assertion that poor homeless people had stayed at the centers “on a voluntary basis” to receive vocational training and other services. The statement assured human rights and other civil society groups that there was no reason for concern about the centers.

On November 6, the day the statement was published, LICADHO staff were permitted to enter the Prey Speu center, in Phnom Penh’s Chom Chao district, for the first time after months of being refused access. Inside, they found that center staff who have been implicated in grave abuses against detainees in the past - and whom LICADHO has asked the government to suspend pending a full investigation - continue to work there.

In addition, LICADHO found irrefutable evidence that people had been forcibly detained there. Scrawled on the walls of two rooms in one of the center’s buildings were messages written by former detainees, such as “Detained in a miserable prison” and “Pity me, help me”. One detainee wrote of living “in terror [and] under oppression” there. Another etched the words “Hell life”, in English, into a wall.

The messages were found in rooms, whose rear windows were nailed shut, in which numerous former detainees have told LICADHO they were confined. Much of the writing on the walls was no longer readable, having been washed away by center staff in June this year, after publicity about abuses committed at Prey Speu. Blood stains were also washed off the walls and floors of the rooms then, according to former detainees interviewed by LICADHO. But some messages - many of them carved into the walls with rocks or other sharp objects - remain legible.

"The walls of Prey Speu speak very clearly about what has happened there for years - human beings, unlawfully arrested from the streets, have been locked up like animals in appalling conditions," said LICADHO director Naly Pilorge. "The evidence is irrefutable and these victims' voices deserve to finally be heard.
"The time for denials from the government is past. Now is the time for real action to provide some long-overdue justice to these victims, and to ensure that no-one else ever has to endure what they did," continued Pilorge. "This should begin with the immediate suspension of all known alleged perpetrators, pending a full investigation into abuses, and the immediate closure of both Prey Speu and Koh Kor."

For years, the government has periodically rounded up homeless people, beggars, sex workers, drug users and other perceived 'undesirables' from Phnom Penh streets and detained them at so-called social centers such as Prey Speu and Koh Kor (the latter, also known as Koh Rumdoul, situated on an island in Kandal province). Although the government has consistently claimed these people agree to stay at the centers, evidence to the contrary has steadily mounted.

In recent months, LICADHO has submitted detailed information to the government alleging unlawful detention and other serious abuses at Prey Speu and Koh Kor. These include the alleged beatings to death of at least three detainees, and gang-rapes of women, by guards at Prey Speu. Suicides of prisoners after abuse by guards have also been reported there.

The Ministry of Social Affairs' November 4 statement said that LICADHO's concerns are similar to those expressed by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and have already been investigated by the Ministry of Interior. It refers to a September 25 report by the Ministry of Interior, without elaboration.

The Ministry of Interior report, sent to LICADHO in response to its allegations, appears to be largely if not solely based on information from the Ministry of Social Affairs. It denies unlawful detentions at Prey Speu or Koh Kor. It acknowledges, however, that persons were kept in padlocked rooms at Koh Kor - as showed in photos taken by LICADHO in June - but claims that this was only for brief periods, and "for the safety" of the people.

After LICADHO's photos of men, women and children locked up at Koh Kor were sent to the government in June, detainees there and at Prey Speu were released. Koh Kor is believed to have remained empty since then, although there are a number of families currently staying at Prey Speu (they say they are there voluntarily because they were promised money if they stay there three months). Neither center has been officially closed - to the contrary, the government insists both remain open - and LICADHO fears that they may be used again as unlawful detention sites at any time.

In the run-up to next week's Water Festival, renewed unlawful arrests of street persons have occurred. LICADHO condemns these round-ups conducted by local authorities but welcomes reports that the Ministry of Social Affairs has refused to accept the arrestees from police.

LICADHO calls upon the police and district authorities responsible for the recent arrests to publicly account for all the arrestees, to ensure that none of them are still being detained anywhere. It also urges an immediate end to such arrests before, during and after the Water Festival, and for the Ministry of Social Affairs to maintain its refusal to accept such persons.

"The government must end once and for all its long-standing policy of abducting and unlawfully detaining poor people and other 'undesirables' from Phnom Penh streets, in order to ‘beautify’ the city," said Naly Pilorge. "If it does not, then the same types of grave abuses will continue to occur, whether it is at Prey Speu, Koh Kor or somewhere else."

Additionally, LICADHO believes that the closure of Prey Speu and Koh Kor, and proper investigations and prosecutions of perpetrators there, are essential to provide justice and to ensure such crimes do not occur again.

"The fact that Prey Speu and Koh Kor not only remain open, but are still run by the same managers and staff who are implicated in abuses, is an affront to their countless victims," said Pilorge. "Whitewashing the walls of Prey Speu will never erase the criminal acts that have occurred there. Instead of continuing to cover up these abuses, the government must show it is serious about addressing them."

See attached photos of Prey Speu walls.

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