Joint Statement: Release Mam Sonando, Owner of Cambodia’s Oldest Independent Radio Station

Phnom Penh (July 16, 2012) – The undersigned organizations are deeply disturbed by independent radio station director Mam Sonando’s arrest on Sunday, July 15, 2012, and call for his immediate release. Mr. Sonando, who holds both Cambodian and French citizenship, is the owner of Beehive Radio, which is among the few independent radio stations in Cambodia. Sonando is also the founder and president of the Democrat Association.

On June 25, 2012, Beehive broadcast a report on the International Criminal Court’s (ICC) June 22 receipt of a lawsuit against the Cambodian government in relation to crimes against humanity. The broadcast included interviews and discussed the lawsuit, which was submitted by government critic Sourn Serey Ratha’s Khmer People Power Movement. The Beehive report was done by Sonando, who had covered the event at the ICC as a journalist.

Twenty-four hours after the Beehive report first aired, the Prime Minister publicly called for Sonando’s arrest during a speech in Phnom Penh which was broadcast on national television. The Prime Minister accused Sonando of inciting a secessionist movement in Kratie province. By July 2, Kratie investigating judge Chok Nguon had issued an arrest warrant accusing Sonando of crimes related to participating in an “insurrectionary movement,” inciting people to take up arms against the state, and obstruction of public officials.

Sonando was out of the country when the arrest warrant was issued. He returned to Phnom Penh on July 12 at about 10:15 pm, during the unfolding ASEAN summit. His arrest three days later came barely 24 hours after foreign ministers and diplomats from around the world departed the city, including United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs, Catherine Ashton.

This morning, Sonando was brought before Phnom Penh Municipal Court Judge Sem Sakola for questioning. At about noon, Sonando was charged under articles 28, 456, 457, 464, 504, and 609 of the Penal Code. The charges all carry significant prison sentences. A conviction under article 464 alone could be punishable by fifteen to thirty years imprisonment. Mr. Sonando is 70 years old.

Despite the fact that Sonando returned to Cambodia to face these unfounded accusations, he was placed in pre-trial detention this afternoon in Phnom Penh’s CC1 prison.

The government has attempted to link the charges against Sonando to an ongoing land dispute and violent forced eviction in Kratie province. On May 16, 2012, hundreds of soldiers, military police and local police, aided by a helicopter, stormed a village in Kratie’s Kampong Domrey commune. The village had been embroiled in an ongoing land dispute with a well-connected private company over a large rubber concession. The government claimed that the military operation, which resulted in the death of a 14-year-old girl, was necessary to stop the villagers from carrying out a plan to secede from Cambodia. At the time, many criticized this justification – none of the armed forces were injured, and there is no evidence that the villagers had any intent or plans to undertake a secessionist movement. Some of the villagers in the area had, however, previously joined the Democrat Association.

“Linking Mam Sonando to this ‘secession movement’ story is nothing more than a transparent attempt to attack one of the few independent radio stations in the Kingdom,” said Vorn Pao,
President of IDEA. “If Beehive Radio is shut down, critical voices will be silenced months prior to Cambodia’s next national election – at a time when they are needed more than ever.”

In his June 25 speech, the Prime Minister also revealed that some of the Kratie villagers accused of having taken part in the alleged secession movement had “confessed” and implicated Sonando. The Prime Minister then stated that other accused individuals still sought by the court in Kratie would be forgiven if they too came forward to incriminate Sonando.

This is not the first time Sonando has been targeted by the government. On January 31, 2003, months before Cambodia’s third national election, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court charged Sonando with announcing false information, inciting people to discriminate, and inciting people to commit crimes. That time, he was released after 2 weeks detention. Sonando was arrested again on October 11, 2005, and eventually charged with defamation, incitement, and broadcasting false information, for having broadcast an interview with an independent expert on politically sensitive issues. That time, he was imprisoned for three months before being released on bail in January 2006 following intense international pressure and a coincidental visit by United States Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, Christopher Hill.

“There is no room for criminal prosecution of critical speech in a democracy,” said Yeng Virak, Executive Director of Community Legal Education Center, who was imprisoned alongside Sonando for several weeks in 2005. “Unless journalists and media owners are confident that their freedom of expression will be protected, a country’s democracy simply cannot function legitimately.”

We, the undersigned, call on the government to release Mam Sonando immediately and ensure that he is afforded all fair trial and due process rights as guaranteed in Cambodia’s Constitution, Code of Criminal Procedure, and international treaty obligations.

Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM)
Cambodia’s Civil Servants Association (CICA)
Cambodian Food and Service Worker Federation (CFSWF)
Cambodian Human Rights & Development Association (ADHOC)
Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
Cambodian Worker Center for Development (CWCD)
Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC)
Community Legal Education Center (CLEC)
Community Peacbuilding Network (CPN)
Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF)
Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
People’s Action for Change (PAC)
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