LICADHO condemns this morning’s violence at Freedom Park

LICADHO condemns this morning’s violence by protesters and authorities at a gathering by Phnom Penh’s Freedom Park. The event which was organized by the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) descended very quickly into violence following interference by authorities and resulted in a number of serious injuries, the worst of which were suffered by district security guards who had been mobilized to prevent the event from taking place.

The protest was intended to draw attention to the months-long barricading of Freedom Park and to call for an end to the ban on public assembly which has been in place since early January following the deadly suppression of garment worker strikes and the dispersal of a peaceful CNRP occupation of the park, which took place between January 2 and January 4. Since the imposition of the ban many protests around the park have been violently broken up by security forces, the majority of whom were district security guards. A number of journalists and protesters sustained serious injuries. CNRP lawmaker-elect Mu Sochua has visited the park on several previous occasions together with her supporters and held similar events. Today’s was the biggest so far, involving a number of other CNRP lawmakers-elect and over 300 supporters.

At 8 o’clock this morning, CNRP supporters began to assemble near Freedom Park in anticipation of the demonstration. They were met by around 60 security guards who were verbally abusive and pushed them back from the intended protest site. At around 8.30 am, several CNRP MPs-elect arrived at the edge of the park with a large number of supporters who were carrying flags and banners.

A few minutes later, when a group of protesters moved to the north side of the park to attach a large “Free the Freedom Park” banner to the razor-wire barricades that seal off the park, the district security guards moved aggressively in, detached the banner and started beating protesters with wooden batons. The protesters very quickly retaliated and began to beat the district security guards, some using the security guards’ own batons against them. Some protesters tried to prevent the violence and CNRP politicians present urged their supporters not to use violence.

Police inside Freedom Park fired smoke bombs into the crowd of supporters and security guards, temporarily causing them to disperse. The security guards ran from the protesters but several were pursued and severely beaten. The violence temporarily abated with many protesters, observers and CNRP members calling for calm and an end to the violence.

Shortly afterwards a second wave of violence broke out resulting in further injuries to both security guards and protesters. LICADHO monitors have confirmed that at least ten security guards and six CNRP supporters were injured. By far the most serious injuries were to the security guards.

While the violence was taking place, Mu Sochua and two other CNRP politicians, Men Thavrith and Keo Phearum, were arrested. They were taken to Phnom Penh police station where they are currently being held. Ho Vann, a fourth CNRP politician was subsequently arrested having voluntarily attended the police station.

Today’s violence follows a six-month period of severe restrictions on peaceful assembly which has often involved the use of brutality against civilians by security forces with district security guards often at the front line committing the most violence. To this day, neither a single security guard nor any commanding authority who ordered the use of violence to disperse peaceful protests has been brought to justice.

LICADHO Director, Naly Pilorge said, “I am deeply shocked by this morning’s events. That a small and supposedly peaceful event should turn so quickly to violence is extremely troubling. LICADHO deplores the use of violence by any party, urges that a full, fair and transparent investigation take place as soon as possible, and calls for the exercise of restraint by all parties.”

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