Joint Statement

World Habitat Day Marred by Brutal Beatings of Human Rights Defenders

Phnom Penh, 10 October

We, the undersigned civil society groups, are outraged by this morning’s unjustified use of violence by district para-police officers during a march to peacefully celebrate World Habitat Day, and we strongly condemn this reprehensible attack.

At about 9.30 this morning, during an otherwise peaceful march through Phnom Penh to the city's Freedom Park, para-police, also referred to as security guards – led by head of the Daun Penh para-police Kim Vutha – launched an unprovoked and violent attack on land activist Chan Puthisak, a Boeung Kak Lake community representative, after Puthisak peacefully attempted to prevent the forcible confiscation by para-police of a drum from the marchers. The para-police continued their violence with a similarly unprovoked attack against senior human rights worker Am Sam Ath, Licadho’s Monitoring Manager, who attempted to peacefully de-escalate the situation and prevent further beatings. An observer, wearing a journalist card, was also injured amid the altercation. All three were left injured and in need of medical assistance.

The attack represents yet another example of the increasingly restrictive environment for the peaceful exercise of fundamental freedoms in Cambodia. The Cambodian government’s de-facto ban on assemblies that are deemed critical of RGC policy, combined with the arbitrary and regular excessive use of force, has created an environment that is not conducive to free and fair elections, and is representative of the overall shrinking of civil society space in Cambodia.

“The beating of an identified human rights monitor for simply doing his job in the face of violence is completely intolerable. Since the Black Monday gatherings began in May, persecution of human rights defenders through the justice system has become a regular occurrence, but having human rights defenders attacked on the streets is a new low,” said Chak Sopheap, Executive Director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR).

“This is just the latest example in a long line of para-police deployed to suppress peaceful protests through violence, a favored strategy for authorities terrified of citizens claiming their rights. It remains to be seen whether this case will also – like so many of the others – result in complete impunity for the perpetrators. It is long overdue for the courts to start prosecuting para-police officers involved in systematic and recurring acts of violence,” said Naly Pilorge, Deputy Director of Advocacy at Licadho.

The otherwise peaceful march of about 500 people began at the former Dey Krahorm eviction site before the group made their way to the Royal Palace and Freedom Park. The march – which three days ago Phnom Penh municipal authorities arbitrarily announced it would not tolerate – was diverted from its original route by security forces including police and para-police officers. Instead

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of marching towards the Ministry of Land Management as originally planned, the group was diverted to Freedom Park.

Following the assault, which took place about halfway through the peaceful march, the group continued to Freedom Park where they made speeches about land and housing rights and presented a petition to Ministry of Land Management officials. The theme of this years’ annual gathering was to once again protest against land grabbing and forced evictions.

“The authorities will not make these issues go away by attacking us. Continued violence and repression will not stop us demanding justice and demanding our housing rights,” said Song Sreyleap, Boeung Kak Lake community representative.

The beatings took place as the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Cambodia begins her latest mission in the country. We urge the Special Rapporteur to address the Cambodian government’s long-standing pattern of violent repression of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly at the highest levels.

We reiterate our strong condemnation of the brutal attack and demand that those individuals responsible are held accountable for their use of violence against a peaceful gathering.

This statement is endorsed by:

1. 92 Community
2. Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT)
3. Banteay Srey Community
4. Beung Pram Land Community
5. Boeung Chhouk Community
6. Boeung Kak Community
7. Boeung Trabek Community
8. Building and Wood Workers Trade Union (BWTUC)
9. Building Community Voice (BCV)
10. CamASEAN Youth
11. Cambodia Development People Life Association (CDPLA)
12. Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU)
13. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
14. The Cambodian Committee for Women (CAMBOW)
15. Cambodian Domestic Workers Network (CDWN)
16. Cambodian Food and Service Workers’ Federation (CFSWF)
17. Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC)
18. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
19. Cambodian Independent Civil-Servants Association (CICA)
20. Cambodian Independent Teachers Association (CITA)
21. Cambodian Informal Economic Workers Association (CIWA)
22. Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC)
23. Cambodian League for the Promotion & Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
24. Cambodian Tourism and Service Workers Federation (CTSWF)
25. Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
26. Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW (NGO-CEDAW)
27. Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL)
28. Chiko Community
29. Chey Chomnas Community
30. Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Domestic Unions (C.CAWDU)
31. Coalition for Integrity & Social Accountability (CISA)
32. Coalition of Cambodian farmer Community (CCFC)
33. Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia (COMFREL)
34. Community Peace-Building Network (CPN)
35. Equitable Cambodia(EC)
36. Farmer Association for Peace and Development (FAPD)
37. Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC)
38. Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF)
39. Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
40. Indigenous Youth at Brome Commune, Preah Vihear Province
41. Khmer Youth Association (KYA)
42. Land Community, I Village Preah Sihanouk Province
43. Mother Nature (MN)
44. Peace Bridges Organization (PBO)
45. Phnom Bat Community
46. Phnom Oral Community
47. Phnom Srouch Community
48. Phum 23 Community
49. Ponlok Khmer
50. Prek Tanou Community
51. Railway Community
52. Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT)
53. SOS International Airport Community
54. Strey Khmer
55. Thmor Kol Community (TK)
56. Toul Sangke B Community
57. Trapaeang Anhchanh Thmey Community
58. Tumnop II Community
59. Wat Than Monk Network
60. Youth Resource Development Program