

Joint Letter to US Secretary of State John F. Kerry

Phnom Penh, January 25, 2016

Dear Secretary Kerry,

We, the undersigned Cambodian civil society groups, urge you to call on the Royal Government of Cambodia to commit to upholding human rights and democratic obligations as a condition of strong and prosperous relations with the United States of America. During your visit to Phnom Penh ahead of the US-ASEAN special summit at Sunnylands we request you to consider the numerous actions of the Cambodian government that clash with the fundamental values of the United States of America and are harmful to the rights of Cambodian citizens and the economic growth of Cambodia.

We call on you to use your unique standing to reiterate to Prime Minister Hun Sen and his government that your government requires respect for democracy and human rights as a key pillar of its diplomatic relations and as a condition of thriving international trading partnerships.

Your visit comes at a critical time for Cambodia, with increasing political tensions and threats to human rights. Currently, 24 individuals are imprisoned or detained as political prisoners. These include an opposition party senator, Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) officials and supporters, a range of activists and two Buddhist monks.

One of these political prisoners, Meach Sovannara, is a US citizen and is currently serving a 20 year sentence for false insurrection charges following a legal process that violated numerous fair and impartial trial rights.

The 24 have been detained for claiming their right to freedom of expression and for calling for respect for democracy and are merely the most high profile examples of the injustice Cambodian citizens face. Protection of these values is at the core of both the Constitution of the United States and the Cambodian Constitution and we call on you to reiterate that respect for democracy and human rights is a pre-requisite to strong diplomatic relations with the USA, and as such demand the release of the twenty four through legitimate legal processes.

In the current political climate democracy itself is in jeopardy. Alongside the well-publicized rule of law abuses against opposition leader Sam Rainsy, on 26 October 2015 two CNRP members of the National Assembly, one of whom is a US citizen, were brutally and publicly beaten outside the National Assembly by a coordinated group of bodyguards to the Prime Minister. Even in the context of Cambodia's turbulent recent political history this event sets a new and dangerous precedent. These assaults came amid orchestrated protests and demands for the CNRP leader and vice president of the National Assembly Kem Sokha to be removed from his position. A mere four days after the violent protests, Mr Sokha was stripped of his role at the National Assembly by ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) members after a CNRP boycotted vote. Of the many assailants filmed participating in the attack on the two CNRP MPs, three members of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces' working for the Prime Minister's Bodyguard Headquarters remain the only suspects currently charged with these assaults. So far authorities have stated that they will not investigate further despite clear evidence of the assault having been ordered and orchestrated.

We urge you to call on the Cambodian authorities to ensure this incident is fully and impartially investigated and that all perpetrators involved in the planning, ordering, and execution of the crime face fair and genuine justice and that politicians and democratic institutions are respected and protected.

Additionally, it is of grave concern that the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces publicly joined the coordinated demonstration demanding the removal of Mr Sokha. While two serving high ranking generals issued a formal letter denouncing Sokha, heavily armed and uniformed soldiers also appeared on national television parading banners calling for the removal of Mr Sokha. Further pronouncements have pledged the partisan support of the armed forces to the CPP and the military is heavily implicated in endemic and widespread land grabbing and unlawful business practice across Cambodia. A politicized military is intolerable in a healthy democracy and we urge you to emphasize this point during your talks with the Cambodian government.

Ahead of the ASEAN discussions it is essential that human rights remain a key aspect of Cambodia's economic growth. We urge you to emphasize to the Cambodian government that respect for human rights is an indivisible requirement for democracy, trade and the economy to flourish. Repressive new laws including the pending Law on Unions of Enterprises create a restrictive environment that will not only harm workers, but will also deter investment in the labor market, one of Cambodia's most important economic sectors. Cambodia is heavily reliant upon trade with the USA and with workers' protests now a daily occurrence it is critical that your government uses its position to reaffirm that repressive state action, unlawful business practices and poor working conditions are not conducive to investment or sustainable economic growth.

We reiterate our plea that you use your influence as Secretary of State representing a major trading partner of Cambodia to ensure the Cambodian government adheres to its obligations under international law and the Cambodian Constitution as a fundamental condition of strong relations with the United States of America.

Sincerely,

Banteay Srey Community (BS)
Boeung Kak Lake Community (BKL)
Borei Keila Community (BK)
Buddhism for Peace Organization (BPO)
Building and Wood Workers Trade Union Federation of Cambodia (BWTUC)
CamASEAN Youth's Future (CamASEAN)
Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM)
Cambodian Committee for Women (CAMBOW)
Cambodian Food and Service Worker Federation (CFSWF)
Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC)
Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
Cambodian Tourism and Service Workers Federation (CTSWF)
Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC)
Community Peace-Building Network (CPN)
Equitable Cambodia (EC)
Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
Peace Bridges Organization (PBO)
Sahmakum Teang Thaut (STT)
Samaki Community
Social Dhamma Danna Organization (SDDO)
The Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW (NGO-CEDAW)
Wat Than Monk Network