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LICADHO

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Government Must Shut Down Prey Speu

Letter to the Editor By Dr. Pung Chhiv Kek, President & Founder of LICADHO

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Dear Editor,

The couple at LICADHO's intake desk is new, but we've heard their story before.

They are street people, the parents of young children. Their kids were recently abducted in broad daylight, from right under their noses. They saw it happen. They know where their children are. They even know the perpetrators.

That's the problem, actually.

This crime wasn't committed by a gang. The men were staff from Phnom Penh's Department of Social Affairs.

The couple tried to protest. But the officials pushed them away and tossed their children in a truck. The kids were destined for the Ministry of Social Affairs detention center at Prey Speu.

Following the arrest, the father located the children at the Phnom Penh Social Affairs Department. There, he learned that one child had been beaten by staff because he was crying for his mother. The father asked the staff why he would beat a child; the staff member responded by striking the father on his head. A few hours later, the children were sent to Prey Speu.

At the center, the children were locked in a small room with children and adults of all ages and genders. They were only allowed out twice per day for short meal periods, when they were given watery porridge. One child was beaten by a staff member after they decided he was asking to go to the toilet too often.

After lengthy negotiations, LICADHO finally succeeded in removing the children from the Center. We found them in a pitiful state. The children had had little to eat and wore the same dirty clothes for the duration of the detention.

This was hardly the first report of abuse we have received regarding Cambodia's social affairs centers. Sadly, it is not likely the last.

LICADHO has documented the abuses at Social Affairs' Prey Speu center since at least 2004. Since that time, we have interviewed numerous former detainees. The victims are of all ages, but always came from society's most vulnerable groups: beggars, homeless, street children, sex workers and drug users. They have all described, with chilling consistency, a pattern of arbitrary arrests on the streets of Phnom Penh, inhuman conditions at the centers, and horrific abuses.

The evidence in favor of closing Prey Speu is powerful. But perhaps the most telling evidence is the government's reluctance to allow regular unannounced monitoring by independent NGOs. LICADHO is routinely denied access to monitor the centers. What is there to hide?

Human Rights Watch's recent report on sex workers ("**Off the Streets: Arbitrary Detention and Other Abuses against Sex Workers in Cambodia**") provides ample details as to why the government would want to avoid open access to these types of centers. But the details bear repeating.

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First, the very existence of Social Affairs centers where people are arbitrarily detained, such as Prey Speu, is of dubious legality. None of the detainees has been charged or convicted with a crime. Someone has simply decided they are unpleasant to look at. The authorities charged with imprisoning the detainees serve the role of judge, jury and jailer. There are no checks on their power.

Second, detainees are held on the pretence of rehabilitation, but in practice, the centers function as dumping sites for society's "undesirables". They offer nothing in the way of rehabilitative programming, social services, training or assistance. In fact, Prey Speu can barely muster the effort to provide food, water and medical care to the detainees. Torture in these centers is rampant, including beatings, rapes and, in some instances, killings. By all accounts, conditions may be even worse than in Cambodia's prisons.

Finally, the so-called "voluntary" inmates at these centers are often voluntary only in the most cynical interpretation of that word. Some of them are employed by the center or the relatives of these pseudo-staff members. Many others are mentally ill or otherwise lacking capacity for meaningful consent.

LICADHO believes it is time for the government to stop its unlawful detention program and shut Prey Speu, which has for nearly a decade been used to lock away the most vulnerable members of society. Further, if justice is to be served, the staff involved in the most serious human rights abuses at the Center must be prosecuted.

**the victims' names and their ages were withheld for protection reasons*