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LICADHO

CAMBODIAN LEAGUE FOR THE
PROMOTION AND DEFENSE OF
HUMAN RIGHTS



THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM: ATTACKS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS 2018-2020

A briefing paper issued in
December 2020



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LICADHO

CAMBODIAN LEAGUE FOR THE PROMOTION
AND DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

CAMBODIAN LEAGUE FOR THE PROMOTION AND DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS (LICADHO)

LICADHO is a national Cambodian human rights organization. Since its establishment in 1992, LICADHO has been at the forefront of efforts to protect civil, political, economic and social rights in Cambodia and to promote respect for them by the Cambodian government and institutions. Building on its past achievements, LICADHO continues to be an advocate for the Cambodian people and a monitor of the government through wide ranging human rights programs from its main office in Phnom Penh and 13 provincial offices.

MONITORING & PROTECTION



Monitoring of State Violations & Women's and Children's Rights:

Monitors investigate human rights violations perpetrated by the State and violations made against women and children. Victims are provided assistance through interventions with local authorities and court officials.

Medical Assistance & Social Work:

A medical team provides assistance to prisoners and prison officials in urban and rural prisons, victims of human rights violations and families in resettlement sites. Social workers conduct needs assessments of victims and their families and provide short-term material and food.

Prison Monitoring:

Researchers monitor urban and rural prisons to assess prison conditions and ensure that pre-trial detainees have access to legal representation.

Paralegal & Legal Representation:

Victims are provided legal advice by a paralegal team and, in key cases, legal representation by human rights lawyers.

PROMOTION & ADVOCACY

Supporting Unions & Grassroots Groups and Networks:

Assistance to unions, grassroots groups and affected communities to provide protection and legal services, and to enhance their capacity to campaign and advocate for human rights.

Public Advocacy & Outreach:

Human rights cases are compiled into a central electronic database, so that accurate information can be easily accessed and analyzed, and produced into periodic public reports (written, audio and visual) or used for other advocacy.

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Supporters of imprisoned union leader Rong Chhun gather to call for the release of human rights defenders arrested in 2020.

ATTACKS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS



Despite the ruling party's unyielding grip on the nation's civil and political institutions, Cambodians across the country persist in standing up to demand and defend their fundamental human rights. Farming communities in rural Cambodia band together to peacefully march on the capital to seek redress for land seizures and forced evictions, which rob families of their land and livelihood. Environmental activists patrol remote woods and valleys to defend their common heritage from the profit-driven predations of private enterprise and politically connected tycoons.

A new generation of workers, students and monks still take to the streets to call for their fundamental rights are respected. And despite the risk of imprisonment or worse, many journalists still report on the daily struggles of poor and marginalised communities faced with widening inequality.

In the three years since the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) last released a report on attacks on human rights defenders carried out by Cambodia's state authorities, the government has overseen the dissolution of the main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), cementing themselves in a de-facto one-party state and leaving non-political activists more vulnerable than ever to increasing government scrutiny. Today, all 125 seats in the National Assembly are held by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP). More than 5,000 commune-level officials chosen by the Cambodian people to be their representatives in the 2017 local elections have been replaced, mostly with CPP

members. Most of the media outlets not already owned or cowed by the ruling party have been closed down or bought by individuals linked to the government. Repressive laws rubber-stamped by CPP-controlled legislatures and enforced by courts lacking independence have strangled what little room there was for civil society organisations to operate and advocate on behalf of the public.

This report is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the attacks targeting human rights defenders since the beginning of 2018. Instead, it seeks to highlight a number of high-profile cases where human rights defenders have been targeted for intimidation, arrest or imprisonment while trying to peacefully exercise their rights to association, assembly and expression as guaranteed both in Cambodia's constitution and under international law. An annexe spanning the beginning of 2018 until the month leading up to this report's publication draws upon the work of LICADHO's human rights monitoring project to detail a broader, though still not comprehensive, pattern of attacks against human rights defenders in Cambodia.

With no political pathway to social change left open to them, these grassroots communities, workers unions and associations continue to work together to advocate for their fundamental human rights, often in the face of brutal state violence. This report is dedicated to the human rights defenders and their families who have faced threats, beatings, and legal action over their activism. Many have lost years of their lives to Cambodia's overcrowded prisons.



Labourers demand safe working conditions on International Workers' Day 2018 in Phnom Penh

GUILT BY ASSOCIATION



Over the past three years, the power of the Cambodian people to freely associate in order to advance their fundamental human rights has been severely curtailed by a government intent on suppressing any and all mobilisation. To this end, it has wielded repressive laws on trade unions, associations and NGOs that entangles organisers in an unwieldy web of regulations; relentlessly pursued youth, student and environmental groups trying to organise peaceful social campaigns; and engaged in a cynical campaign to paint any and all organisation within civil society as part of a fictional “colour revolution” conspiracy.

In April 2018, the Council of Minister’s Press and Quick Reaction Unit released a video accusing several independent membership-based groups – the Independent Democracy of Informal Economic Association (IDEA) president Vorn Pao and Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC) president Theng Savoeun – of incitement. The video alleged they were members of a vast and nebulous conspiracy theory of a “colour revolution” – a theory that was later repeated in an op-ed featured in government mouthpiece Fresh News. Human rights monitors, as well as lawyers

providing legal aid to those targeted by the government, are routinely accused of inciting social chaos as a way of delegitimizing civic engagement.

The harassment of human rights defenders was particularly widespread for unionists and those organizing workers to advocate for their rights. In January 2020, Building and Wood Workers Trade Union of Cambodia (BWTUC) president Sok Kin was harassed by local authorities in Phnom Penh’s Sen Sok district while meeting with donors and colleagues at his office in Phnom Penh. Authorities demanded to know the reason for the meeting, accused Kin of not having sought permission from local officials to hold a meeting in a private premise and urged the union official to join the ruling party.

This kind of harassment of pro-worker unions and their leaders is often justified through the 2016 Law on Trade Unions, which has faced long-standing and wide condemnation for putting in place a bureaucratic maze for local unions and federations. Unions have reported that the excessive demands of registration mean that the process of signing up can sometimes take more than a year,

stifling their ability to represent their members. Many still routinely face rejections, often on flimsy grounds such as spelling errors.

Repression of membership-based organisations and their leaders was also sometimes accompanied by brutal violence. In February 2020, W&D garment factory deputy union leader Soeurng Bros was left seriously injured when three masked men on a motorbike beat him on the head with a steel pipe while the unionist was waiting in line to buy food outside his factory in the capital. No suspects were ever arrested. Since then, a number of people linked to unions or the former political opposition taking part in public assemblies have been targeted by similar attacks.

Four members of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) as well as a National Election Committee staffer, collectively known as the ADHOC 5, were sentenced to five years in prison on spurious bribery charges in September 2018 in a one-day trial after 427 days in pre-trial detention. Although the sentence was suspended, the politically motivated jail term is still hanging over their heads.

Even the memory of civil society leaders who dedicated their lives to building common ties between different communities are suppressed. In July 2019, 28-year-old activist Kong Raiya was arrested after advertising t-shirts on Facebook bearing the image of murdered political commentator Kem Ley. Raiya was later charged with incitement to disturb social security. The next day, two environmental activists, Chum Hut and Chum Huor, were arrested alongside Soung Neakpaon, the deputy head of the Khmer Student Intelligent League Association (KSILA) youth group. The three men had joined with other youth activists, union leaders and civil society members to pay tribute on the three-year anniversary of Ley's murder at the site of his murder in Phnom Penh. Neakpaon, was also charged with incitement to commit a felony and sent to pre-trial detention – though for him, his crime was holding up a placard calling for an end to extrajudicial killings. Both Neakpaon and Raiya were released on bail in 2020. Raiya was convicted in absentia in June.

LAW ON ASSOCIATIONS AND NGOS

Despite a series of “consultative meetings” around the 2015 Law on Associations and Non- Governmental Organisations (LANGO) that have continued into 2020, the ruling party has made it clear that it lacks the will to make meaningful changes to the harmful legislation. Instead, the government has used the law in recent years to obstruct the activities of human rights defenders, especially those from grassroots communities. This harassment came even after more than one hundred local CSOs, as well as a coalition of international garment brands that source from Cambodia, urged the government to roll back the controversial legislation in 2020. Over the past three years, LANGO has been invoked repeatedly to justify a climate of surveillance and intimidation that has dogged civil society organisations trying to engage with grassroots communities throughout Cambodia's provinces.

In 2020 alone, the government has accused a number of local associations of engaging in illegal activities for not having registered with the Ministry of Interior, including the Prey Lang Community Network and, more recently, environmental and youth activists from the environmental movement Mother Nature and youth group Khmer Thavrak. This renewed crackdown on grassroots activism, which has led to the imprisonment of a number of young activists engaged in peaceful demonstrations, is exactly the type of abuse of LANGO that makes the harmful law's immediate repeal necessary.

CASE STUDY: RONG CHHUN

Cambodian Confederation of Unions president Rong Chhun was taken from his home by police in a nighttime raid at the end of July 2020. Chhun, who has been an outspoken advocate for workers' rights in Cambodia for decades, previously worked as president of the Cambodia Independent Teachers' Association before becoming a member of the country's National Election Committee until the dissolution of the opposition. He was arrested after the government's Cambodia Border Affairs Committee publicly called on authorities to take action against the unionist for his comments following a visit to poor communities living along the Cambodia-Vietnam border earlier that month.

Chhun, who is also a member of the non-governmental Cambodia Watchdog Council, had given a radio interview just hours before his arrest denying that he had been spreading false information the week before, when he gave a public statement about alleged community land loss along the border.

The unionist was charged with incitement and sent to pre-trial detention in Phnom Penh's Correctional Centre 1, where he remains to this day. This charge – which could see Rong Chhun sentenced to up to two years in prison – is a clear violation of the unionist's right to freedom of expression as guaranteed by Cambodia's constitution.

In the week prior to his arrest, the union leader had joined more than 200 garment workers who gathered to submit a petition outside the home of Prime Minister Hun Sen, asking for his help following their factory's closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By standing shoulder-to-shoulder both with workers fighting for their rights at work and marginalized communities struggling to preserve their right to land and livelihood, Rong Chhun showed the strength that can be achieved when people band together around a common purpose. His arrest led to the imprisonment of more than a dozen peaceful protestors who were calling for his release.



Union leader Rong Chhun was arrested in July 2020 after speaking out on behalf of farming communities along the Vietnam border.



Khmer Thavrak youth activist Chhoeun Daravy was arrested while taking part in a peaceful protest calling for Rong Chhun's release.

CASE STUDY: KHMER THAVRAK

With fewer opportunities for young Cambodians to take part in the civic life of their nation in the past few years, a number of youth and student groups have played a more active role in the struggle for a just and equitable Cambodia. For their passion and courage, many of these young men and women have faced threats, arrest and imprisonment.

Although newly founded youth group Khmer Thavrak had already had run-ins with the police, notably after a peaceful demonstration earlier this year against unsustainable microfinance debt in the northwest city of Battambang, it was not until the arrest of union leader Rong Chhun that the group faced its first arrest.

After a day of peaceful protests in the capital in August calling for Chhun's release, Khmer Thavrak youth activist Chhoeun Daravy was dragged into a van by her hair by men in civilian clothes after her belongings were forcibly seized by district security forces during the demonstration. Fellow activist Hun Vannak was arrested later that day by plainclothes officers mid-livestream while walking home from the protest.

The next day, 19-year-old youth group member Tha Lavy was arrested while stepping out of a tuk-tuk at Phnom Penh's Freedom Park on his way to a peaceful demonstration at the designated protest space. He planned to call for his fellow activists' release. Another Khmer Thavrak member, Eng Malai, was followed by police from the protest and arrested that same evening, shortly after leaving the Phnom Penh office of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNOHCHR).

Targeting youth who passionately advocate for a freer and fairer society with violent arrests and the threat of years locked away behind bars is an attempt to stamp out the dream that tomorrow could be better than today. The gross abuse of these youths' right to free association and assembly is a stark reminder of how little space for public advocacy remains in Cambodia.



Members of the Prey Lang Community Network gather together under the watchful eye of armed forest rangers to hold a Buddhist tree-blessing ceremony in 2019.

TAKING TO THE STREETS



The power to assemble in peaceful demonstrations is a fundamental right guaranteed to every Cambodian under the nation's constitution and international law. Despite the best efforts of the government to restrict this right, with groundless justifications and spurious accusations involving fictitious revolutions, many of the men, women and children who have taken to the streets in peaceful protest these past three years have done so fully aware of the real risk of imprisonment to protect that which is most precious to them: the very ground beneath their feet.

For farming and urban poor communities who find themselves the victims of violent land grabs and forced evictions, peaceful assembly in front of the halls of power can be a powerful way to have their voices heard. But these communities are increasingly monitored and harassed by local police for their peaceful activism. On World Habitat Day 2020, more than a dozen local communities across the country faced intimidation when they tried to hold peaceful gatherings. This shrinking space has led more

and more communities to organise and advocate over social media, as a way of spreading their message in the face of physical repression.

Despite her eventual pardon in August 2018, Boeung Kok Lake land rights activist Tep Vanny spent more than 700 days in detention on baseless charges of intentional violence following her peaceful involvement in a 2013 demonstration – a conviction that was upheld by the Supreme Court in February 2018. She fled the country shortly after her release.

In June 2020, police in Koh Kong province forcibly stopped a group of young activists who were trying to cycle from the provincial capital to Phnom Penh as part of their “Save Koh Kong Krao Island” environmental campaign. Provincial police seize the young Cambodians’ bicycles to prevent the group from cycling to Phnom Penh to submit a petition calling for Cambodia’s largest island to be designated as a protected national park. Earlier in May, a group of

armed police had broken up a peaceful demonstration by the group in Phnom Penh's Chrouy Changvar district, confiscating banners and flags calling on the island to be protected and threatening the participants with prison.

For those who risk life and livelihood to monitor and combat Cambodia's rampant illegal logging trade, even standing together in the shade of the forests they call home is often denied to them. In February 2020, more than 200 people including monks, community members and environmental activists from the Prey Lang Community Network were blocked by armed police and environmental officers while travelling into the forest from five different provinces to hold an annual tree-blessing ceremony. Two community representatives were physically assaulted and threatened with arrest by environmental officers if they continued into the forest to hold the peaceful ceremony.

It would not be the last time that Prey Lang forest would prove off-limits to communities who have the greatest stake in its conservation. In April 2020, dozens of environmental activists were stopped from gathering in Prey Lang forest to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Chut Wutty, an environmental activist and

defender of Cambodia's forests. Again, activists were met with armed environmental rangers and threatened with arrest. Wutty's son, who is now president of the Natural Resources Protection Group, was one of the young activists prevented from paying tribute to his father's death. The next day, a local military commander sent 50 soldiers into the forest to search for five environmental activists in a blatant display of force to the local community.



The Prey Lang Community Network has dedicated itself to preserving Cambodia's wilderness from illegal logging.

CASE STUDY: MOTHER NATURE

Having been deregistered as a non-governmental organisation by the Ministry of Interior in September 2017, Mother Nature Cambodia continued on as an environmental movement dedicated to exposing environmental devastation in Cambodia. Despite facing concerted pressures from local authorities at every turn, the group continued to play a profound role in defending the common inheritance of all Cambodians through conservation, preservation and environmental activism. In September 2017, outside of this report's reporting period, activists Dem Kundy and Hun Vannak were arrested after filming cargo ships suspected of transporting illegally dredged sand in Koh Kong province. In January 2018, the pair were sentenced to a year imprisonment, with seven months of the sentence suspended. They had already spent months in pre-trial detention. At the time of this report, Vannak is once again locked away in pre-trial detention for his peaceful activism.

The movement was again targeted in September 2020, when authorities charged three young environmental activists with incitement and ordered them to pre-trial detention. The trio was seeking to call attention to the government's filling in of Phnom Penh's Boeung Tamok lake, but their peaceful protest drew the ire of the authorities.

The three activists - Thun Ratha, Long Kunthea and Phuong Keorasmey - were arrested over their organising of a peaceful march from Wat Phnom to Prime Minister Hun Sen's house. Long Kunthea planned to march in order to express her concerns regarding the parceling off of the capital's largest remaining lake to connected individuals. All three activists were charged with incitement and remain in pre-trial detention. The youngest, Keorasmey, is just 19 years old.

By calling for Cambodia's natural resources to be preserved and protected for every citizen rather than being sold off to the highest bidder, environmental activists like Ratha, Kunthea and Keorasmey raised an important issue, and one that will likely define the next decade or more of Phnom Penh's urban development. Their concerns are the concerns of millions of Cambodians, and their arrests are a cynical attempt to stifle debate over topics of immense public importance.



Mother Nature Cambodia activist Long Kunthea was imprisoned in 2020 for planning a one-woman march in Phnom Penh to protest the filling-in of Boeung Tamok lake.



Villagers in Tbong Khmum province physically block an excavator from clearing away their homes and farmland.

CASE STUDY: HARMONY WIN

In early December 2019, more than a hundred villagers in Tbong Khmum province gathered to protest against the Chinese-owned Harmony Win Investment Company attempted clearing of farmland long used by the community to grow rice. The private company had brought in ten tractors to scour the land, guarded by roughly 30 armed soldiers and police acting as security for the corporation.

The community had already paid a high price for its activism. Two months earlier, two community representatives named Phon Chhoeun and Sem Sang had been arrested following their role in defending their communities' right to land and livelihood. Members of their communities who attempted to visit the Tbong Khmum provincial court to monitor their trials in October 2019 were stopped on the road by mixed security forces. Both men were denied bail in January 2020, Chhoeun released in June. Sang remains in prison.

As of June, security guards from Harmony Win Investment continued to cut off community access to their rice fields. More than 600 families who have relied on the land for housing and farming have been affected by the dispute. The conflict has been going on for more than eight years with no end in sight.



Former RFA reporters Yeang Sothearin and Uon Chhin are released on bail in August 2018. They remain under investigation for politically motivated espionage charges.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH SILENCED



Despite the closure or co-option of many of Cambodia's remaining independent media outlets, a number of local journalists have continued to play a critical role in exposing the widespread corruption and impunity in the Kingdom. These journalists do so at great personal risk, publishing each article with the looming threat of being thrown in jail for their reporting.

In the year between the commune elections and the 2018 national election, both the *Cambodia Daily* and the *Phnom Penh Post* were silenced. Both newspapers were fiercely independent dailies staffed by both local and international journalists, publishing in Khmer and English. Faced with an overwhelming and arbitrary tax bill, the *Daily* shut its doors in September 2017. The *Post*, likewise threatened with a hefty bill of allegedly unpaid taxes, was sold to a Malaysian businessman with links to the ruling party in May 2018. An article published after the sale that investigated these links was met with retaliation by the new management, who immediately fired the paper's editor-in-chief as well as the journalists who had worked on the story. More than a dozen editors and journalists resigned in the following days.

The closures of these newspapers, as well as the silencing of more than 30 radio frequencies carrying programming such as Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) in the lead-up to the 2018 election has cut off the source of news for millions of Cambodians. Journalists who continue to work to publish the truth are increasingly coming under legal and physical threat.

Former RFA journalists Uon Chhin and Yeang Sothearin remain locked in legal limbo after the Supreme Court threw out a request by the two reporters to halt a seemingly endless investigation into politically motivated espionage and pornography charges in October 2020. Both men were arrested on 14 November 2017 and spent more than nine months in pre-trial detention before being granted bail.

In May 2020, police in Kampong Chhnang province arrested local radio station owner Sok Oudom on charges of incitement to commit a felony for his frequent reporting on longstanding land disputes between local farming communities and district officials. The day before Oudom's arrest, the Ministry of Information revoked the media license of his Rithysen Radio Station and its website,

despite the fact that Oudom had yet to be charged with any crime. He remains in pre-trial detention.

In June this year, Phnom Penh police seized Ros Sokhet, the publisher of the *Khmer Nation* newspaper, after a series of posts on his Facebook page addressing the Cambodian government's handling of the nation's rising microfinance debt levels and speculation around political succession within the CPP. Once again, the journalist was charged with incitement over his public interest reporting and sent

to pre-trial detention in the capital's notorious Prey Sar prison. He was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment in November.

This charge, that reporting on human rights abuses is tantamount to criminally inciting the public to illegal action in search of redress, has been deployed with growing frequency not just against journalists but civil society organisations who monitor such abuses across the country.



Former *Phnom Penh Post* editor-in-chief Kay Kimsong embraces one of the newspaper's reporters after being fired by the new management.

CASE STUDY: SOVANN RITHY

At the start of 2020, Cambodia was faced with impending economic crisis and the spectre of the collapse of its fragile public health system following the first reports of COVID-19 in the Kingdom. The need for a free press to keep a frightened public informed was more vital than ever. Despite this, authorities arrested popular TVFB journalist Sovann Rithy for his straightforward coverage of the prime minister's own announcements as to what the government was doing to help people through the health and economic crisis.

Addressing the nation in April, Prime Minister Hun Sen publicly and repeatedly stated that the government did not have enough money to support informal workers such as motorcycle taxi drivers through the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, and advised bankrupt taxi drivers to sell their vehicles in order to survive.

When Rithy reposted the Prime Minister's remarks on his personal Facebook page, he was arrested that night and charged two days later with incitement to commit a felony. Rithy's news outlet TVFB was stripped of its broadcasting license the day after his arrest. He was convicted in October with a suspended sentence of 18 months in prison. He had already served more than five months. Although he was released, the suspended sentence is still hanging over his head. TVFB has not had its license restored.



TVFB journalist Sovann Rithy is just one of the journalists who has been targeted by the government for his reporting. Photo: CamboJA



Activist monk Loun Sovath has been repeatedly attacked by the government for his defence of human rights.

CASE STUDY: LOUN SOVATH

Venerable Loun Sovath is a prominent activist monk and internationally recognised human rights defender who first rose to worldwide acclaim over his role in covering the Boeung Kak Lake land dispute. Since then, he has been relentless in defending the rights of all Cambodians despite being the target of slanders and threats from the ruling party for more than a decade.

In 2020, this campaign of intimidation rose to ugly heights with the publication of leaked audio on Facebook in June falsely alleging that the monk had broken his vow of celibacy. In the following months, an investigation by *The New York Times* revealed that employees of the Press and Quick Reaction Unit, the official propaganda arm of the Cambodian government, were responsible for the creation and posting of the falsified videos.

For Loun Sovath, this revelation came too late. Defrocked in absentia by a government-controlled monk council in Siem Reap, he fled the country and has since been charged with rape.

This baseless smear campaign against a widely respected human rights defender was aimed at disgracing a religious figure who had consistently held the government to account for its abuses. This kind of character assassination has been repeatedly levelled at Buddhist monks who exercise their constitutional rights to freely associate and assemble in the name of social causes. Four monks from different pagodas who joined a peaceful demonstration in Battambang in May were threatened with expulsion from their pagodas for joining the non-violent demonstrations. In November this year, two monks who had been living in Phnom Penh fled across the Thai border after taking part in demonstrations calling for Rong Chhun's release, having received reports that police were searching their pagodas and hometowns.

Loun Sovath's case, along with other cases of monks being arrested, de-frocked or forced to flee the country, is a sad reflection of the government's intolerance for any social activism by members of the monkhood.

An Expanding Arsenal of Repressive Laws

The ruling party has used its one-party control of the National Assembly and Senate to pass or prepare new laws that grant nearly unlimited power to prosecute and incarcerate those who stand up to advocate for their own rights.

Constitutional Amendments

In February 2018, the National Assembly approved draft amendments to the nation's constitution severely curtailing the ability of Cambodians to participate in the civic and democratic life of the country. The amendments prohibit Cambodian citizens from "any activity" that directly or indirectly "affect[s] the interests" of Cambodia or its citizens, as well as enabling the stripping of the right to participate in elections and limiting the right to freedom of association by requiring both political parties and ordinary citizens to "put the interests of the nation first". These amendments introduced unacceptably vague and arbitrary strictures on free expression, association and assembly.

Lèse-majesté

Also in February 2018, the National Assembly approved a draft amendment to Cambodia's Criminal Code criminalizing any insult to the nation's king. This lèse-majesté clause, which carries a jail term of one to five years and substantial fines for expression by individuals or legal entities judged to be offensive to the sovereign, was used to charge and arrest three people who were arrested and charged with this offense for sharing content deemed to be insulting to the king's person just months after the amendment's passage.

Law for the Management of the Nation in a State of Emergency

During the COVID-19 pandemic in April, Cambodia's National Assembly approved legislation allowing the government to declare a state of emergency in response to undefined "dangers" facing the nation. The vaguely worded law gives the government unchecked powers to restrict fundamental rights including freedom of assembly, expression, movement and the right to work and own property.

In addition to outlining sweeping criminal penalties for vague offences such as "disrespecting" measures taken by the government, the legislation empowers the government to deem legal entities criminally responsible for these largely undefined crimes. Under this provision, any organisation, association, union or other group may be dissolved if one member is found guilty of violating vague state of emergency orders.

Draft Law on Public Order

Leaked to the media in June, the draft law on public order would fundamentally constrict almost every aspect of Cambodians' daily lives if passed in its current form. Some of the most concerning elements of the law include criminalising revealing clothing on women; dictating that people with mental illnesses – vaguely defined as any condition that stops people from knowing "right and wrong" – are not allowed to appear in public without a caretaker; and the banning of basic daily activities, such as burning rubbish, hanging up washing in public view, selling food or products on the street or any form of begging.

The law also raises serious concerns for freedom of assembly and association. Any public event can be stopped if authorities determine it violates an ill-defined notion of social stability and preserving national traditions. Reasons for shutting down an event can even include "causing hostility to competent authorities". The number of people who can attend any kind of public gathering could also be arbitrarily limited under the law. If the law passes, it will result in a fundamental reimagining of daily life in Cambodia, extinguishing any remaining rights to peaceful assembly or association and completely subject these freedoms to the arbitrary enforcement of local authorities.

Draft Law on Cybercrime

A draft Law on Cybercrime leaked in August 2020 demonstrated the depths of the ruling party's desire to police the digital lives of the Cambodian people. In its current form, the law grants the government tremendous power to monitor and punish certain types of online speech while also recording private data without a user's knowledge – all in the name of maintaining “security and public order”. Perhaps most worryingly, the law criminalises “false statements and disinformation” published on the internet, with the relevant article specifically targeting statements that “diminish public confidence in the performance of any duty or function or in the exercise of any power by the Government or State institutions” (unofficial translation). Given the government's long history of labelling criticisms of state power as politically motivated lies, this clause alone may seriously restrict any internet user who wants to express an opinion on the social, political, or economic state of Cambodia.

National Internet Gateway Sub-decree

On 8 July, the government drafted a sub-decree to create a National Internet Gateway operator, which would be responsible for working with government authorities to block or disconnect all network connections that affect undefined “social order, dignity, culture, traditions and customs” and cooperate in the “assurance of safety [and] public order”. The sub-decree could be used to shut down CSO websites and block citizens from accessing critical content on the internet, recalling the government's order demanding ISPs block dozens of news and opposition-affiliated websites ahead of the 2018 national elections. The sub-decree also mandates that internet service providers store a wide range of metadata for a whole year, leaving the door open for later violations of the right to privacy.

Draft Law on State Property Control, Use, and Management

The transferral of public land into private hands has been the driving factor behind many of the land disputes that have driven communities across Cambodia from their homes. These kinds of giveaways may become more frequent following the passage of the draft law on state property management, which provides a legal framework for the reclassification of state public land to state private land and the donation of state public property to private individuals for “economic and social reasons”. This emerging form of land capture has unsurprisingly been accompanied with conflicts with local communities. Also concerning is the fact that the above-mentioned draft law appears to shut down any avenue to claim occupancy ownership, instead calling for the immediate eviction of families living on public property without any compensation. The draft legislation is currently under review by the ruling party-dominated Senate.

Taken together, these laws further empower the government to wield arbitrary and absolute power to suppress fundamental human rights and silence those who work to defend them. Without substantial revision or repeal of those passed already and concerted campaigning against those yet to pass through the National Assembly, the remaining ability for civil society and local communities alike to advocate for themselves and the people around them will be severely curtailed.



Workers gather in Phnom Penh's Freedom Park to celebrate International Workers' Day 2019.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



2020 marks the first year since the end of the civil war that International Human Rights Day will not be celebrated in Cambodia. Last year, the ruling party elected to strike December 10 from its list of public holidays. This unwillingness to celebrate a day dedicated to the universal human rights that Cambodians are entitled to under local and international law has sent a bitter message to the Kingdom's human rights defenders.

Armed with every seat in the National Assembly, unrivalled control of the nation's judiciary and legislative organs and the vast majority of the Kingdom's media outlets, the ruling party has used the years following the destruction of the political opposition to formalise its arbitrary and absolute domination of the daily lives of its citizens. Yet despite waves of arrests and the unceasing intimidation of

any kind of community-led organisation, farmers, workers and activists continue to lift their voices in protest of the daily degradation of their fundamental human rights. The work of these human rights defenders in speaking out to demand that their basic rights are respected has come at a high cost for many of the demonstrators, journalists and community representatives that have sometimes sacrificed years of their lives in prison rather than submit to injustice. With the passage of the draft laws discussed in this report, their ability to advocate on behalf of their families and communities will all but disappear. But the courage that has fuelled decades of peaceful demonstrations and unwavering activism will remain – and find new forms in the words and deeds of a rising generation willing to take the fight for their fundamental freedoms to new frontiers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Cambodian government and authorities:

- ▶ Release all imprisoned human rights defenders immediately and unconditionally.
- ▶ Conduct prompt, thorough and impartial investigations into threats and attacks against human rights defenders, and allow for prosecuting perpetrators to the fullest extent of the law.
- ▶ End unwarranted crackdowns on people peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly, association and expression. Stop the use of force by security forces, including para-police, against peaceful demonstrations and strikes.
- ▶ Revise the Criminal Code to ensure that it respects the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia and its obligations vis-à-vis international human rights treaties Cambodia has ratified. In particular, broad or vague provisions, especially incitement, and all provisions that impact freedom of speech, such as defamation and insult, should be revised to ensure that they do not impede freedom of speech nor allow for the arbitrary arrest of human rights defenders.
- ▶ Repeal the Law on NGOs and Associations; amend controversial clauses in, or abrogate, the Law on Trade Unions and other labour-specific legislation; repeal or substantially amend the new state of emergency legislation to bring it into line with Cambodia's human rights obligations; and discard the draft law on public order and ensure that any subsequent legislation respects and upholds the fundamental freedoms of the Cambodian people.
- ▶ Implement the recommendations made by successive UN Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights in Cambodia with regard to strengthening the rule of law and the judiciary. This should include taking effective action to improve the independence and impartiality of the judiciary. Call for the judiciary to uphold its independence in all cases, but in particular for those involving human rights defenders.

To the international community:

- ▶ States and international institutions should continue to call for an end to attacks on Cambodian civil society and Cambodian human rights defenders in dialogue with the Cambodian government and publicly.
- ▶ States with mechanisms targeting perpetrators of serious human rights abuses should consider employing them to investigate individuals and companies complicit in human rights abuses within Cambodia where appropriate.
- ▶ Representatives of states and multilateral institutions should request access to detained human rights defenders and observe key trials and events involving human rights defenders and political activists.
- ▶ Representatives of states and multilateral institutions should present a unified and public condemnation of the government's recent intimidation and arrest of peaceful activists and urge Cambodian authorities to immediately drop all charges against peaceful demonstrators imprisoned for exercising their constitutional rights to free expression.

ANNEXE: Recent Attacks on Human Rights Defenders



January 18, 2018

ANTI-LOGGING ACTIVIST FACE MENACING PHONE CALLS

A member of the Prey Lang Community Network in Preah Vihear province receives threatening phone calls telling him to “be careful” after he and four other community members seized illegal logging material including tractors, chainsaws and luxury wood from five villagers believed to be conspiring with local authorities while patrolling community land.

January 28, 2018

ANTI-LOGGING ACTIVISTS THREATENED AT GUNPOINT

Loeurt Los, deputy chief of Bat Noem Monk Community Forest, is threatened with a pistol by a group of seven Brigade 42 soldiers in Oddar Meanchey province’s Samraong district as Los and four other people patrolling the community forest try to prevent the perpetrator from transporting illegal lumber out of the protected area.

January 30, 2018

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE CALLED IN FOR QUESTIONING

Four representatives from a community in Banteay Meanchey province are called in for questioning by the commune police chief after organising a gathering to discuss possible land dispute resolutions. All four representatives were forced to thumbprint an agreement promising not to gather again without the express permission of local authorities – under penalty of criminal charges.

February 23, 2018

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE ARRESTED

Koh Kong community representative Heng Sok is arrested and sent to pre-trial detention. The arrest was led by district deputy police chief Prum Vanny after a foreman at the Koh Kong Special Economic Zone (SEZ) accuses him of committing violent acts. More than 100 hectares of farmland occupied by 50 families since the early 1990s were seized in 2005 to make way for the SEZ, which is owned by ruling party senator and tycoon Ly Yong Phat.

April 23, 2018

CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS HIT WITH ‘COLOUR REVOLUTION’ SLANDER

The Council of Minister’s Press and Quick Reaction Unit releases a propaganda video accusing Independent Democracy of Informal Economic Association (IDEA) president Vorn Pao, Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC) president Theng Savoeun and NGO Forum executive director Tek Vannara of incitement as part of a sweeping colour revolution conspiracy. Government mouthpiece Fresh News also ran an opinion piece repeating these baseless allegations.

May 07, 2018

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF FIRED FROM NEWSPAPER

Phnom Penh Post editor-in-chief Kay Kimsong is fired from his job by the newspaper’s new owner, Malaysian businessman Sivakumar S. Ganapathy after the newspaper ran an article investigating links between Ganapathy’s public relations firm and the Cambodian government. Three editors and more than a dozen reporters also resigned after the new management asked staff to remove the article from the newspaper’s website.

*All cases here are drawn from unpublished LICADHO monitoring reports unless stated otherwise. Politicians and political activists can also act as human rights defenders. However, the Cambodian government has a history of associating critics with the political opposition in order to dismiss legitimate criticism and grievances. In this context, LICADHO has not included attacks and threats to politicians or political activists in this annex.

June 10, 2018

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES THREATENED OVER TRIP TO THE CAPITAL

Land community representatives in Tbong Khmum province's Memot district are threatened by the commune chief and local police chief after planning to travel to the Ministry of Land Management in Phnom Penh to seek a resolution to a long-standing land conflict with Men Sarun Import Export company. The day before, a community representative from a nearby commune had been forced to thumbprint a contract pledging not to travel to the capital after gathering more than 200 families prepared to make the trip to Phnom Penh in search of redress. All three community representatives were threatened with legal action.

July 01, 2018

JOURNALIST THREATENED BY WEALTHY BUSINESSMEN

Yvon Chhiv, a journalist at Today newspaper, receives death threats from two wealthy men in Koh Kong province's Botum Sakor district. One man threatened to kill the journalist with his own hands while another, Chea Sothavarith, who had previously beaten Chhiv, posted a comment on Chhiv's Facebook page attaching a picture of a gun and threatening the journalist's life. Chhiv, who often published stories investigating land disputes, corruption and the impunity of powerful men, had publicly criticized both men, accusing one of building a house on a local pond and causing increased flooding in the village.

July 05, 2018

HUMAN RIGHTS WORKER THREATENED BY PRIME MINISTER'S CABINET

Yi Soksan, a senior staff member at the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) is accused by prime minister's cabinet secretary Kong Chamroeun of inciting families affected by a land dispute in Kampong Cham to travel and protest in the streets of Phnom Penh. The accusation was reprinted by several newspapers aligned with the ruling party. Soksan had previously been working with families involved in the dispute fueled by transmission lines construction by with China National Heavy Machinery Corporation (CNHMC).

July 09, 2018

INFORMAL WORKER ASSOCIATION REPRESENTATIVE THREATENED

Four unidentified men enter the house of a member of the Independent Democratic Informal Economy Association (IDEA) in Banteay Meanchey province. He isn't home, but his son is. The four men tell his son that his father needs to be more careful.

August 27, 2018

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY RIGHTS MEETING BLOCKED

Din Khornny, ADHOC coordinator for Ratanakiri province, is surveilled and photographed by local authorities while holding training sessions covering human rights and law-related topics with local indigenous communities. Commune council chief Kit Chem had ordered the chiefs of four different villages in Lumphat district not to allow ADHOC to hand out its programme – and to prohibit villagers from joining the training session.

September 03, 2018

HUMAN RIGHTS MONITOR MEETING BLOCKED

Leng Seng Han, a human rights monitor with ADHOC, is prevented from conducting a meeting with more than 30 representatives of communities from Tbong Khmum's Memot and Dambe districts at the rights organisation's Kampong Cham office to discuss a long-standing land dispute. Despite the meeting taking place on private property, the local village chief as well as district and commune police officers refused to allow the meeting to go ahead, claiming that organisers had needed permission from local authorities first.

September 25, 2018

RIGHTS WORKERS INTERROGATED BY POLICE

Four human rights workers from LICADHO are intimidated and brought to the commune police station for questioning in Pursat province's Veal Veng district on the orders of the commune police chief. The group had provided material assistance as part of the rights organisation's social work project to 17 families locked in a land conflict with MDS Company, a rubber concessionaire owned by powerful tycoon Try Pheap. The four rights workers were accused of having handed out the materials without the permission of local authorities.

October 16, 2018

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE INTERROGATED OVER FOOD SOVEREIGNTY CAMPAIGN

Soeng Sokhom, a community representative from Kampong Speu province's Aoral district, is summoned to the commune police office on the orders of district deputy police chief Prak Moul after Sokhom and 25 other local community members held an event celebrating the 16 Days of Global Action campaign promoting Food Sovereignty and Agroecology. The representative was released only after thumb-printing the police's record of the interview.

October 26, 2018

LAND RIGHTS MARCH HALTED AND REPRESENTATIVES ARRESTED

Around 30 people, including community land activists from Koh Kong province and former Boeung Kak community members are prevented from marching in Phnom Penh's Daun Penh district by district security guards. Three community representatives – Sea Nareth, Chray Nim and Preap Ratha – are arrested and taken to the district police station for question after trying to deliver a petition to the office of the prime minister's cabinet calling on Prime Minister Hun Sen to intervene to end their long-standing land disputes.

October 30, 2018

LAND RIGHTS MEETING BLOCKED

ADHOC rights workers in Kampong Cham province are prevented from holding a meeting with 23 local community representatives in the provincial capital by the local village chief as well as district and commune-level police. The community representatives, who had hoped to discuss the resolution of a long-running land dispute at ADHOC's Kampong Cham office, were blocked on the grounds that they had not informed local authorities of their meeting.

November 08, 2018

RIGHTS ORGANISATION COORDINATOR INTIMIDATED

An ADHOC employee in Kampong Cham province is intimidated and monitored by commune and district police while meeting with representatives from seven communities locked in long-running land disputes. The community representatives had come to ADHOC's Kampong Cham office to talk about potential resolutions to the conflict, as well as take part in smartphone training to help them better advocate on behalf of their communities. Local authorities photographed attendants and warned them that they needed to ask permission prior to meeting.

January 04, 2019

COMMUNITY LAND REPRESENTATIVES THREATENED

Four community land representatives including Hoam Nai, Rom San, Say Tay and Srok Lang in Tbong Khmum's Memot district are summoned to the Tonlung commune office for questioning over a long-running land dispute with businessman Chhun Savuth. The four representatives were forced to thumbprint a contract agreeing not to organize community protests or gatherings on penalty of legal action.

January 29, 2019

VILLAGE REPRESENTATIVES BEATEN AND DETAINED

Mok Heng and Chhoem Chhuon, village representatives from Kampong Thom province's Prasat Balangk district, are illegally arrested and beaten by police before being sent for questioning at the provincial station. The two men are forced to thumbprint a document turning their land and threatened with imprisonment should they continue to protest against a 2016 land grab that saw almost 1200 hectares of farmland occupied by 586 families seized and cleared to make way for a World Bank-funded social land concession. Another land representative, Eang Sokmeng, was arrested in June and charged with intentional physical assault.

February 13, 2019

CHIEF MONK DEFROCKED OVER FREE SPEECH

The Venerable Hor Sokhon, the chief monk of Phnom Penh's Chbar Ampov pagoda, is forcibly defrocked by high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Cults and Religion before a mixed force of more than 50 police officers on the orders of the capital's governor Khuong Sreng. Sokhon had posted content on social media criticising the government's failure to retain full tariff-free access to the European Union through the Everything but Arms (EBA) trade scheme due to ongoing human rights abuses in Cambodia.

March 08, 2019

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATIONS BLOCKED

More than 60 people from four different communities across Kampong Cham province's Memot district are prevented from celebrating International Women's Day by Memot district governor Cheng Bunna, who along with commune officials claimed that the communities had not registered their plans with local authorities. A Tunlong community representative is threatened with imprisonment if the celebrations go ahead as planned.

March 14, 2019

EDITOR RECEIVES DEATH THREATS OVER NEWSPAPER STORY

Siem Reap-based newspaper editor-in-chief Phlong Reth receives death threats after he publishes a story accusing a commune chief of selling off land to a businessman. Reth was ordered to edit the published story to remove the allegations.

April 25, 2019

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE QUESTIONED OVER PETITION

A community representative in Tbong Khmum province is summoned for questioning at the commune police station after collecting local villagers' thumbprints on a petition related to a land dispute – and sharing "This Society" on social media, a song by 24-year-old rapper Chhun Dymey heavily critical of social injustices throughout Cambodia.

May 13, 2019

RAPPER HARASSED OVER VIRAL SONG

24-year-old rapper Chhun Dymey is confronted by two police officers in Siem Reap who demand to see his birth certificate, job and family book. Dymey had recently released a song – "This Society" – lashing out at widespread social injustice including corruption, the plight of poor communities and ongoing land disputes. Dymey later took the song down from his social media accounts.



Chikor Kraom community representative Pav Nherng joins a demonstration outside Phnom Penh's Ministry of Land Management in September 2020.

May 28, 2019

HUMAN RIGHTS WORKER THREATENED BY POLICE

An ADHOC rights worker in Kampong Cham province is threatened over the phone by the commune police chief after holding a meeting with 35 local community members to discuss freedom of expression.

June 04, 2019

LAND ACTIVIST JAILED OVER MEDIA INTERVIEW

Community land activist Ther Then is arrested by police in Kampong Thom province's Stoung district and sent to the provincial prison after giving an interview to Radio Free Asia (RFA). The warrant, which accused Then of giving false information to the radio station, was issued following a complaint filed by Korm Saroeurn, former advisor to interior minister Sar Kheng. On March 12, 2019, Ther Then had shared with RFA grievances of local residents with regards to access to water to irrigate their fields.

July 09, 2019

ACTIVIST ARRESTED OVER KEM LEY MEMORIAL

28-year-old activist Kong Raiya is arrested alongside his wife and two other family members by ten municipal police officers after Raiya advertised that he was selling t-shirts bearing the image of murdered activist Kem Ley on Facebook. Raiya had also posted the phone number of a taxi driver prepared to bring people from the provinces in to Phnom Penh to commemorate the anniversary of Ley's shooting. Raiya was later charged with incitement to disturb social security. The next day, two environmental activists named Chum Hut and Chum Huor are arrested alongside Soung Neakpaon, the deputy head of the Khmer Student Intelligent League Association [KSILA] youth group. The trio had joined with other youth activists, union leaders and civil society members to commemorate the three-year anniversary of Ley's murder at the Caltex Bokor petrol station in Phnom Penh's Chamkarmon district. Neakpaon, who had been handing out leaflets calling for an end to extrajudicial killing, is charged with incitement to commit a felony and sent to pre-trial detention.

July 11, 2019

JOURNALIST, FARMERS SUED OVER LAND DISPUTE

Three people including a journalist from Kampong Chhnang's Chol Kiri district are sued for defamation and incitement to commit a felony by district governor Hai Monorum. Rithy Sen radio journalist Sok Oudom as well as local farmers Ung Poy and Pri Lai Sin were targeted in connection to a long-running land dispute in Prey Kri Tbong village.

July 19, 2019

JOURNALISTS ARRESTED ALONGSIDE LAND ACTIVISTS

Two local journalists – Head of Independent Journalist Club Hun Sokha and TN newspaper editor Keo Ratana – were groundlessly arrested by military police alongside five community members in Sihanoukville municipality amid protests seeking to prevent excavators from clearing disputed land lived on by 24 families. The arrest took place on the orders of tycoon Khov Sambath. Both journalists were later released after questioning.

September 15, 2019

BOREI KEILA RESIDENTS ILLEGALLY DETAINED

Seventeen former residents of the Borei Keila neighbourhood in Phnom Penh are illegally arrested and held for hours at the Prampi Makara district police office on the orders of Phnom Penh deputy governor Mean Chanyada. The local residents had been peacefully calling for compensation for their forced eviction and trying to prevent the demolition of the old Borei Keila building. Of the 17, five people were sent to Prey Speu rehabilitation centre for two days. All seventeen were later released after questioning, having first been made to sign a contract pledging not to hold similar protests in the future.

October 04, 2019

MONK THREATENED FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

A monk living in a forest pagoda in Kampong Speu province is woken by gunshots fired at the temple's pillars by an unknown shooter. The monk, who had previously joined in environmental activism alongside the Mother Nature movement and worked to protect the wild trees and animals of his forest home, also found a threatening message stuck on a tree warning that there would be no peace if the "bad monk" continued his activism.

November 09, 2019

JOURNALISTS DETAINED AHEAD OF RAINSY'S RETURN

Two Voice of Democracy journalists, Vann Vichar and Chhorn Channren, are arrested and detained for three hours at the military police headquarters in Banteay Meanchey's Poipet district. The journalists had been reporting at the Poipet international checkpoint ahead of opposition figure Sam Rainsy's planned, though unsuccessful, return to Cambodia. Both journalists were released after thumbprinting a police record of their interrogation.

December 08-09, 2019

LOCAL COMMUNITIES THREATENED OVER RIGHTS DAY PLANS

A community representative in Preah Sihanouk province is threatened with arrest by a deputy district police chief after more than a hundred people from ten different communities, including six affected by land conflicts across the province, planned to celebrate International Human Rights Day. Members of the communities locked in land disputes had thumbprinted a petition calling on local authorities to find a resolution to the conflicts.

December 26, 2019

NEWSPAPER EDITOR QUESTIONED OVER REPORTING

Thngai Thmey newspaper editor Tiev Som Ul is summoned for questioning by district police in Banteay Meanchey's Poipet district after a complaint from Lach Bunlim, a powerful tycoon. The complaint focused on a recently published article covering a land dispute between the tycoon and a local woman in Phsar Kandal commune.

December 26, 2019

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE COERCED OVER RADIO BROADCAST

A community representative is forced to thumbprint a contract promising not to publicly broadcast Radio Free Asia radio station after he played a radio broadcast through a loudspeaker at a community meeting in the village hall in Kampong Chhnang province. Two community representatives were warned not to lead the community in celebrating International Human Rights Day on December 10.

January 15, 2020

UNION LEADER HARASSED BY AUTHORITIES

Sok Kin, president of the Building and Wood Workers Trade Union of Cambodia (BWTUC) is harassed by local authorities on the orders of Sen Sok district governor Mouv Manit while conducting a meeting with donors and colleagues at his office in Phnom Penh. Authorities demanded to know the reason for the meeting, accused Kin of not having sought permission from local officials and allegedly urged the union official to join the ruling party.

February 03, 2020

MOTHER NATURE YOUTH ACTIVISTS INTIMIDATED

Three activists from environmental movement Mother Nature including Thun Ratha, Pinh Piseth and Sith Chivlimeng are detained and threatened by Daun Penh district police while filming the location where seized elephant ivory and other illegal animal products have been stored in Phnom Penh. Deputy district police chief Chhun Bunnan confiscated the camera's memory card and released the three young activists only after they had signed an agreement promising to halt their activism.

February 10, 2020

UNION OFFICIAL ATTACKED WITH STEEL PIPE

W&D garment factory deputy union leader Soeurng Bros is seriously injured when three masked men on a motorbike beat him on the head with a steel pipe as Bros is standing in line to buy food outside the factory in Phnom Penh's Meanchey district.

February 18, 2020

CONSERVATIONISTS ILLEGALLY DETAINED

Ten volunteer staff from a local wild life, forests and fisheries protection and conservation organisation are illegally detained by armed forces in Preah Sihanouk province's Prey Nob district while monitoring sand-dredging activities in the coastal province. After eight months in pre-trial detention, they are handed a suspended sentence of two years in prison.

February 21-22 2020

PREY LANG COMMUNITY BLESSING BLOCKED

More than 200 people including monks, community members and environmental activists from the Prey Lang Community Network are blocked by armed police and environmental officers while travelling into the forest from Preah Vihear, Kampong Thom, Stung Treng and Kratie provinces to hold an annual tree-blessing ceremony. In Kampong Thom province, two community representatives are physically assaulted and threatened with arrest by environmental officers if they continued into the forest to hold the peaceful ceremony.

March 13, 2020

FARMERS THREATENED WITH ARREST

A community representative and four CCFC staff are prevented from conducting a training on human rights and farming to a group of 30 villagers in Prey Veng province's Ba Phnom district. The staff, who were working to set up a community saving group, were threatened with arrest by the deputy commune police chief if they continued with the training.

March 14, 2020

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS BEATEN AND ARRESTED¹

Four environmental activists, including Goldman Environmental Prize-winner Ouch Leng, are beaten by guards of Think Biotech Co, Ltd, a joint Taiwanese-Khmer company repeatedly accused of illegal logging, before being handed over to local authorities for more than two days of questioning. Throughout their detention, dozens of local community members, activists and monks peacefully gathered in front of the provincial court to call for their freedom. The activists were later released, though remained under investigation as suspects. Think Biotech, which has been granted a 34,000-hectare concession, has been repeatedly accused by local communities of illegally harvesting timber within the protected forest as well as resin trees owned by local villagers.

¹LICADHO Flash Info, "Environmental Activists Released After Days of Community Protests", March 16 2020, <https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/flashnews.php?perm=277>

April 07, 2020

JOURNALIST JAILED FOR QUOTING HUN SEN'S WORDS

TVFB news director and journalist Sovann Rithy is arrested in Phnom Penh's Sen Sok district and sent to pre-trial detention on charges of incitement to commit felony after posting a quote from a recent speech by the prime minister. Rithy's post repeated word for word a statement by Hun Sen that moto-taxi drivers were facing financial difficulty due to the global COVID-19 pandemic they should sell their motos, as the government would not be able to help. Even before Rithy was charged, the Ministry of Information stripped TVFB of its broadcasting license. After nearly six months in prison, Rithy was convicted and given an 18-month suspended sentence.

April 25, 2020

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS THREATENED OVER MEMORIAL

Roughly 40 youth and environmental activists including Natural Resources Protection Group (NRPG) president Chheuy Odorm Reaksmeay, the son of murdered environmental activist Chut Wutty, are stopped from gathering in Prey Lang forest to commemorate the anniversary of Wutty's death by ten armed environmental rangers and threatened with arrest. The armed men were led by provincial environment department chief Meas Nhoem, as well as the Rovieng deputy district governor and accompanied by local health officials who claimed that the ban was intended to stop the spread of COVID-19. The next day, commander of Intervention Brigade No. 3 Srey Deuk sent 50 soldiers into the forest to search for five environmental activists – Ouch Leng, Khem Sokhy, Srey Thei, Srey Tin and Heng Srar – who had attended the event.

April 28, 2020

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES DETAINED OVER COVID PETITION

Fifty-year-old community representative Ny Sandos as well as eight people representing 141 communities across Cambodia were detained and interrogated for eight hours at Daun Penh district police station after arriving in Phnom Penh to submit a petition calling for more government assistance to vulnerable communities during the COVID-19 epidemic. The nine people were forced to thumbprint a contract agreeing to halt their activities before their release.

May 09, 2020

YOUTH ACTIVISTS, MONKS THREATENED OVER MFI PROTESTS

Several members of Cambodian youth group Khmer Thavrak including human rights activist Hun Vannak are arrested and held for hours of questioning at the Battambang provincial police station for their involvement in a peaceful protest calling on microfinance institutions (MFIs) and banks to suspend loan repayments among the economic crisis caused by COVID-19. Four monks from different pagodas were also threatened with expulsion from their pagodas for joining the non-violent demonstrations.

May 13, 2020

JOURNALIST ARRESTED OVER LAND GRAB REPORTING

Rithy Sen newspaper journalist Sok Oudom is illegally arrested by a group of ten police officers led by the Kampong Chhnang provincial police chief after interviewing members of more than a hundred families whose land was seized by a senior military commander. Oudom was charged with incitement to commit a felony and sent to pretrial detention in Kampong Chhnang prison.



Armed forces look on as Prey Lang Community Network members gather to perform a tree-blessing ceremony in 2019.

June 03, 2020

ACTIVIST MONK FORCED TO FLEE AHEAD OF SMEAR CAMPAIGN

Prominent activist monk and internationally recognised human rights defender Venerable Luon Savath is defrocked in absentia by a government-controlled monk council in Siem Reap after audio was leaked onto Facebook which alleged, falsely, that Savath had engaged in inappropriate sexual activity with a mother and her daughters. Savath relocated to Europe on a humanitarian visa and was charged in absentia for rape. On 23 August, a New York Times investigation revealed that employees of the Press and Quick Reaction Unit, the official propaganda arm of the Cambodian government, were responsible for the creation and posting of the false videos.

June 03, 2020

CYCLING CAMPAIGN BLOCKED

A group of young activists, including several belonging to environmental movement Mother Nature, are stopped by police while cycling from Koh Kong province to Phnom Penh as part of their "Save Koh Kong Krao Island" campaign. Provincial police seize the young Cambodians' bicycles to prevent the group from cycling to Phnom Penh to submit a petition calling for Cambodia's largest island to be designated as a protected national park. Earlier in May, a group of armed police broke up a peaceful demonstration by the group in Phnom Penh's Chrouy Changvar district, confiscating banners and flags and threatening the participants with arrest.

June 22, 2020

MONKS' MEDITATION DEMONSTRATION HALTED

Thirteen monks in Battambang are forced by their superiors to sign a contract pledging not to take part in protests, strikes or workshops on social justice after ten plainclothes provincial police officers break up a peaceful gathering at Por Veal pagoda. The monks, who had been meditating and holding banners, were accused of disturbing social order and gathering together without permission from local authorities.

June 25, 2020

JOURNALIST JAILED OVER FACEBOOK POSTS

Cheat Khmer newspaper journalist Ros Sokhet is arrested in Kampong Chhnang's Teuk Phos district and sent to pre-trial detention in Phnom Penh's Prey Sar prison on incitement charges after publishing a series of Facebook posts deemed critical of the ruling party. The posts suggested that Prime Minister Hun Sen had mismanaged the national response to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

July 08, 2020

FOREST ACTIVIST BEATEN AT PUBLIC FORUM

Forestry activist Chhorn Phalla is beaten by a group of villagers in front of authorities during a public forum in Ratanakkiri province organized by Lumphat district governor Nou The. Phalla, who had voiced concerns over forest conservation and ongoing land disputes in the community, reported that the district governor had threatened to imprison him if he did not stop protesting or filing complaints.

July 21, 2020

FOREST ACTIVIST THREATENED OVER MONITORING

A member of the Prey Lang Community Network is threatened by a known timber trader with political connections while taking photos of illegal timber being transported at night. The trader confiscated the forest activist's phone and filed a complaint at the district military police station demanding compensation for having taken photos of him without permission.

July 31, 2020

UNION LEADER ARRESTED OVER BORDER INVESTIGATION

Cambodian Confederation of Unions president Rong Chhun is arrested by police at his home late on Friday night after the government's Cambodia Border Affairs Committee publicly called on authorities to take action against the unionist for his comments following a visit to the Cambodia-Vietnam border on July 20. Chhun – a member of the non-governmental Cambodia Watchdog Council – had given a radio interview just hours before his arrest denying that he had been spreading false information about alleged community land loss along the border in a public statement the week before.

Chhun was taken to Phnom Penh Municipal Court the following morning and charged with “incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest” under articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code before being sent to pre-trial detention in Phnom Penh's notoriously overcrowded Correctional Centre 1. Dozens of supporters gathered outside the court all through the weekend to call for the unionist's release despite security forces ordering them to disperse.

August 04, 2020

MONKS ARRESTED, ACTIVISTS IMPRISONED

Eight monks as well as four former opposition activists are arrested by a group of more than 30 police after joining a demonstration calling for the release of imprisoned activist Rong Chhun. Although most are released after having been made to sign a contract promising not to continue protesting, activists Chum Puthy and Chhuo Pheng are charged with incitement and sent to CC1 prison in Phnom Penh.

August 07, 2020

JOURNALIST ARRESTED OVER INTERVIEWS

Sneha Cheat journalist Keo Hour is arrested by a group of police officers in Kampong Chhnang's provincial capital after Huo interviewed peaceful protestors who had gathered outside the Chieb commune office over a land conflict earlier in May. He is not told the reason for his arrest. He was subsequently bailed, but the criminal charges remain over his head.

August 13, 2020

YOUTH ACTIVISTS CAUGHT IN CRACKDOWN

Six youth activists are arrested in Phnom Penh after repeatedly calling for union leader Rong Chhun's release. Youth activist Chhoeun Daravy, who has a long history of social justice work and environmental activism, is dragged into a van by her hair after her belongings were forcibly seized by district security forces during the peaceful protest. Environmental activist Hun Vannak is later arrested by plainclothes officers mid-livestream while walking home from the demonstration.

Both activists are charged with “incitement to commit a felony” under articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code, which is punishable by up to two years in prison. Vannak is detained in Phnom Penh's Correctional Centre 1 (CC1), while Daravy is in Correctional Centre 2 (CC2). The other four are released from custody after being pressured into signing contracts pledging not to take part in similar demonstrations.

September 03, 2020

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS JAILED OVER ONE-WOMAN MARCH

Three young environmental activists – Long Kunthea, Phoung Keorasmeay and Thun Ratha – are arrested for planning a one-woman march to raise awareness about the filling-in of Boeung Tamok lake in the capital's north. Three days later, the three are charged with incitement to commit a felony or disturb social order under Articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code and imprisoned. The youngest, Keorasmeay, is just 19 years old.

September 04, 2020

YOUNG RAPPER ARRESTED

21-year-old rapper and songwriter Kea Sokun is arrested in Siem Reap four months after releasing the song Khmer Land, which criticised corruption and inequality in Cambodian society as well as fears of loss of sovereign land. He is charged with incitement and sent to Siem Reap prison.

September 06, 2020

MONK DEFROCKED, ACTIVIST ARRESTED OVER DEMONSTRATIONS

Ordained Buddhist monk Koet Saray and Khmer Student Intelligent League Association vice-president Mean Prommony are arrested by police over plans for a peaceful assembly in Freedom Park to call for the release of union leader Rong Chhun, Khmer Win Party president Soung Sophorn and Khmer Thavrak members Chhoeun Daravy and Hun Vannak following their arrests in August. Venerable Saray is defrocked the following afternoon, and both men are also charged with incitement and sent to pre-trial detention in Phnom Penh's Correctional Centre 1.

The next day, Khmer Thavrak youth group member Tha Lavy, 19, is arrested while stepping out of a tuk-tuk at Phnom Penh's Freedom Park on his way to a peaceful demonstration at the designated protest space calling for the release of imprisoned union leader Rong Chhun. Another Khmer Thavrak member, Eng Malai, is followed by police from the protest and arrested that same evening after leaving the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights.

September 10, 2020

YOUTH ACTIVIST ARRESTED

24-year-old activist Moung Sopheak, the brother of KSILA president Moung Sony, is arrested without a warrant on the orders of Phnom Penh municipal police chief Sar Thet for his involvement in planned demonstrations calling for Rong Chhun's release. He is charged with incitement and sent to pre-trial detention.

