

# URGENT ACTION

## CAMBODIAN FOREST DEFENDERS UNDER THREAT

Cambodia's Prey Lang rainforest - one of Southeast Asia's most important ecosystems – is under threat. In recent weeks, Prey Lang's defenders have been threatened, arrested, and attacked. The harassment of Prey Lang's defenders is a threat not only to the rainforest and the Indigenous peoples who live there, but also the global struggle against climate change.

**TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER**

**Prime Minister Hun Sen**  
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Cambodia  
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Dear Prime Minister Hun Sen,

I am writing to express my grave concern about the recent attacks on **environmental human rights defenders working to protect the Prey Lang rainforest** and to urge you to ensure that all human rights defenders are guaranteed a safe and enabling environment to conduct their work without fear of reprisals. It has been brought to my attention that in recent days and weeks, activists working to expose rampant illegal logging in the Prey Lang rainforest have faced a barrage of harassment, including arbitrary detention and physical attacks, by both state authorities and corporate actors.

On 13 March in Kratie Province, four prominent forest defenders were arrested and detained and one was beaten while investigating allegations of illegal logging. They reportedly remain under investigation as suspects. Just weeks earlier on 22 February, armed rangers deployed by the Ministry of Environment blocked members of the Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN) who were seeking to participate in PLCN's annual tree blessing ceremony, and the event was arbitrarily shut down.

Ministry of Environment officials have claimed that PLCN is operating illegally because it has not registered under Cambodia's widely criticised Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO), contradicting multiple prior assurances from the Ministry of Interior that the LANGO does not apply to grassroots and community-based groups. The United Nations' human rights office has previously stated that LANGO's mandatory registration regime is inconsistent with Cambodia's obligations to protect the right to freedom of association, enshrined in the Cambodian Constitution and international human rights law.

Grassroots environmental human rights defenders such as PLCN have been at the frontline of the fight against illegal logging in Cambodia for 20 years. Illegal logging has devastated Cambodia's rainforests and severely impacted Indigenous peoples' spiritual beliefs and livelihoods. These forest defenders are protecting not only Cambodia's remaining natural heritage but also making a vital contribution to the global effort to address the climate crisis.

**I therefore urge you, Prime Minister Hun Sen, to use your influence to:**

- **Stop the harassment and intimidation of environmental human rights defenders in Cambodia and ensure they are supported and protected while conducting their vital work;**
- **Ensure a thorough and impartial investigation into all credible allegations of assault, arbitrary detention, and illegal logging by agribusiness companies operating around Prey Lang;**
- **Ensure the repeal of the LANGO, or its review and amendment in order to bring it in line with international human rights law and standards and re-clarify that the LANGO's existing registration requirements do not apply to grassroots networks and community-based organisations.**

Yours sincerely,

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Prey Lang is mainland Southeast Asia's largest lowland evergreen forest covering approximately 500,000 hectares and spanning four of Cambodia's provinces. The forest is a biodiversity hotspot which is home to many endangered species of animals and plants, making it a region of global environmental importance.

More than 250,000 people live in and around Prey Lang, most of whom identify as Indigenous Kuy. Prey Lang means "our forest" in the Kuy language and Indigenous peoples have sustainably relied on the forest for generations. Prey Lang is a crucial part of Kuy culture and spiritual life and serves as a vital resource for Kuy people's livelihoods. Prey Lang was designated as a Wildlife Sanctuary in 2016 and timber exports from the forest were banned.

Despite this designation, Prey Lang remains under serious threat due to rampant illegal logging. The Prey Lang Community Network have reported 41,758 hectares of forest loss between 2001 and 2018, equating to almost 10% of the Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary. In late 2019, one of the largest companies operating in the area, Think Biotech, was subject of a joint investigation by the Cambodian Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries following allegations of illegal logging of indigenous people's ancestral forests located outside the boundaries of the company's land concession in Prey Lang.

The conservation of Earth's remaining rainforests is essential to any hope of preventing catastrophic damage caused by climate change. The United Nations has stated that "[e]liminating emissions from deforestation ... could reduce global net emissions by up to 30 per cent".

PLCN – a grassroots network of mostly Indigenous forest defenders - was established in 2001 by local community members who were concerned at the devastating scale of illegal logging which they witnessed in Prey Lang. Its members are part-time volunteers who take significant risks to patrol the forests in order to monitor and deter illegal logging and poaching. PLCN has won multiple international awards, including the UNDP Equator Initiative Prize at COP21 in Paris in 2015 and the Alexander Soros Foundation Annual Award in 2013.

Ministry of Environment officials have recently claimed that PLCN is operating illegally because it has not registered under Cambodia's Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO). Officials further accused the network of issuing inaccurate reports about deforestation and other forest crimes in Prey Lang. Penalties for conducting activities in the absence of registration under the LANGO include bans on activity, fines, and even the criminal prosecution of members.

These threats against PLCN are the latest example of the weaponization of the LANGO to stifle and repress independent civil society organisations and grassroots activism. The LANGO was introduced in August 2015 against a barrage of criticism from international and Cambodian human rights organizations. Prior to the law's adoption, Amnesty International called for the rejection of the LANGO, citing inconsistencies with the right to freedom of association and the potential impacts on grassroots activism.

### **PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: [English, Khmer]**

You can also write in your own language.

### **PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 02 May 2019**

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

### **NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Group [they/them]**