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Cambodia: Rule of law ignored as Cambodia prepares for polls

PHNOM PENH – On the last day of campaigning before the 26 July elections in Cambodia, Amnesty International representatives in the country today condemned the ongoing violence and intimidation.

Operating in a climate of institutionalized impunity, members of the security forces controlled by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) are able to commit human rights violations without fear of being brought to justice. Lack of concrete action by the state is compounded by near silence from the international community on cases of concern, thus perpetuating the cycle of violence, the representatives said.

“The human rights situation in Cambodia has become so twisted that victims are blamed for their suffering, and investigators are condemned for their efforts to protect the victims,” an Amnesty International spokesperson said. “Much of the international community plays down the level of violence, sanitises the trauma of victims and ignores the impact of human rights violations on freedom of association and expression.”

“Activists have been intimidated, politicians have been threatened, party agents have been shot and killed, and prisoners have been illegally arrested and badly beaten by policemen while held in detention.”

The majority of the victims are associated with the two major opposition parties, FUNCINPEC and the Sam Rainsy Party.

On 22 July, Amnesty International delegates located Danh Teav, a FUNCINPEC Ministry of Interior employee who had been arrested without a warrant in the evening of 20 July and held in incommunicado detention by the Phnom Penh Criminal Police. He was severely beaten in an attempt to compel him to “confess” to involvement in the attempted murder of a pro-government newspaper editor earlier this year and other crimes.

When the delegates saw him, he was unable to stand without help, had bruises and abrasions on his back and chest, and cuts around the wrists where he had been shackled. Danh Teav's wife is an election candidate for the opposition Sam Rainsy Party and was detained for two hours with her husband.

The delegates also found five other men, all shackled together with Danh Teav, at least three of whom had been badly beaten in police custody. The clothes of two of the men were covered in blood, and both had cuts and swelling on their faces. They were frightened of being taken back to the police station to face further beatings. None of the six had been allowed access to lawyers, doctors or family members while in police custody.

The Amnesty International team also interviewed a FUNCINPEC party activist who had been shot in the leg, following months of harassment from the local CPP authorities since the July 1997

violent ousting from power of FUNCINPEC First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh. The authorities claim that he shot himself as “an attention-seeking gesture”.

Repeated and measured attempts by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to draw the government’s attention to the human rights situation in the country have been met with violence and threats. In April a staff member was assaulted, and the government has since made clear its intention to expel UN personnel blamed for bringing human rights violations to light.

“The international community cannot turn a blind eye to the widespread intimidation in Cambodia,” the spokesperson said. “Foreign government officials in Phnom Penh and election monitors in the country must speak out about each and every incidence of political violence and intimidation. It is then up to the Cambodian authorities to ensure that all of Cambodia’s voters can go to the polls on Sunday without fear.”

BACKGROUND

The human rights climate in Cambodia has deteriorated sharply following a grenade attack on a peaceful opposition demonstration organized by Sam Rainsy in March 1997. At least 16 people died and over 100 were injured. No serious investigations into the incident have been undertaken by the government authorities.

Scores of people were extrajudicially executed during a coup in July last year in which FUNCINPEC First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh was ousted from power. Most of the victims were high-ranking FUNCINPEC military and security personnel. No one has been brought to justice for any of these killings, although in a blatantly unfair trial the Phnom Penh Military court imposed a post-mortem sentence of 20 years’ imprisonment on one of those killed.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, thousands of opposition politicians and supporters, mainly from FUNCINPEC and the Sam Rainsy Party, fled the country. Although political party activists later returned to participate in the election, thousands of FUNCINPEC officers and troops remain on the Cambodian-Thai border, and dozens of FUNCINPEC security personnel who remained in the country have been killed over the past year.

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