



CAMBODIA PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE TUOT SARON



Photo © Private

Tuot Saron is serving a three-year prison sentence on what are believed to be politically motivated charges. He is an activist in the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), the largest opposition party in Cambodia, and the former head of Pongro commune, in Baray district of Kompong Thom province. Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

Tuot Saron was arrested in Baray district on 18 March 2008 and charged with being an accomplice to unlawful confinement. The authorities also charged three other SRP activists with the same crime; they went into hiding before they could be arrested.

After one year in pre-trial detention, Tuot Saron was brought to trial on 20 March 2009 at Kompong Thom Provincial Court. He was convicted as charged and sentenced to three years' imprisonment, and a fine of USD 2,500. The three others charged were tried in absentia and sentenced to between three and five years' imprisonment.

The charges arose out of allegations that an SRP member who had come under pressure to change allegiance to the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), was abducted and illegally held by the four men. Tuot Saron has always denied the charges, and Amnesty International believes that the accusations against him were baseless and politically motivated, in order to intimidate other opposition party activists.

In the months prior to the July 2008 general election, the CPP was seeking to further consolidate its position and members of opposition political parties were targeted, mostly through intimidation and financial inducements, to join or align themselves with the CPP. In this tense pre-election campaign atmosphere, Tuot Saron said that he and his three colleagues were asked for protection by the SRP member under pressure. They escorted her to Phnom Penh from Kompong Thom for her own safety.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Cambodia stated that its own investigation into the case showed that there was no credible evidence to support the allegation of abduction, and that it had shared its findings with the relevant courts and officials. At the trial, the prosecution reportedly failed to present corroborating evidence of the alleged crime, and relied mainly on uncorroborated statements. Despite this and other shortcomings at the trial, all four SRP members were convicted.

Tuot Saron is in his early 40s and married with four children; his family is struggling to make ends meet since his imprisonment. He is in Kompong Thom prison, where he shares a cell with more than 100 other prisoners, many of whom are in ill health as a result of the poor conditions.

Background

The 2008 elections were conducted with fewer incidents of violence than in previous elections, but were marred by the killing of Khim Sambor, a journalist for the SRP-affiliated newspaper, and his son two weeks before polling day. The CPP won 90 of 123 seats, the SRP 26, and three other smaller parties won seven seats.

Sam Rainsy Party supporters, including members of parliament, local officials, journalists and activists have been targeted at various times in the past few years because of their opposition political activities; some have been subjected to threats, others have been imprisoned and several have been unlawfully killed.

Take Action!

- **Write to:**

His Excellency Sar Kheng
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior
Ministry of Interior
No 275 Norodom Blvd
Khan Chamkamon
Phnom Penh
Cambodia

Salutation: Your Excellency

Fax: + 855 23 721 905

Email: moi@interior.gov.kh

- and to the diplomatic representative of Cambodia in your country.

- **Express concern that Tuot Saron has been sentenced to three years' imprisonment on charges that appear to be baseless and politically motivated;**
- **Call for the immediate and unconditional release of Tuot Saron as a prisoner of conscience.**