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## **Cambodia: Freedom for human rights activists -- court finally faces facts**

Amnesty International welcomes today's decision by a Cambodian court to drop all charges against two local human rights activists.

"The court has finally faced up to the facts -- Kim Sen and Meas Minear are innocent, and should never have been charged," Amnesty International said. "This is an important day for human rights protection in Cambodia."

Kim Sen and Meas Minear, both employees of LICADHO (the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights), were arrested on 21 December 1998 and falsely accused of inciting riots. They had been monitoring the sometimes violent demonstrations that swept through the town of Sihanoukville in December 1998, during widespread panic at the dumping of Taiwanese toxic waste in the area.

"The court's admission that there was no evidence against the accused should stand as a lesson to all those involved in the judicial system that prosecutions in future must be based on evidence, not hearsay," Amnesty International said.

"There are scores of cases where alleged human rights violators, against whom there is credible evidence, have not been prosecuted, and yet the authorities chose to bring to trial two human rights defenders, even in the absence of any evidence to support the charges against them."

Kim Sen and Meas Minear were held in pre-trial detention for a month, and were adopted as Amnesty International prisoners of conscience before being granted bail by the Phnom Penh Court of Appeal.

Extensive investigations by local and international human rights organizations found no evidence against the two human rights defenders, or against a third man, Khieu Piseth, who was also charged with incitement. An Amnesty International observer also noted that during the opening two days of the trial on 8 and 9 July 1999, no evidence against them was presented in court.

Seven other people, including two minors, were also on trial at the same time on charges of robbery committed during the demonstrations. Several of them claimed they had been tortured in custody. Amnesty International welcomes the court's decision also to dismiss all charges against these defendants.

The court proceedings, which at times fell short of international standards for fairness, were marked by hostile questioning of defendants and witnesses in the opening days of the trial. Kim Sen and Meas Minear both faced hours of questioning and accusations from the judge and the prosecutor.

Amnesty International hopes that in the future, human rights defenders in Cambodia will be able to go about their legitimate work without fear of wrongful arrest and prosecution. The ordeal which Kim Sen and Meas Minear have been through must not happen again.

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