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Cambodia: peaceful protest should be allowed without fear of bloodshed

The Cambodian authorities should guarantee the security of all those participating in a peaceful demonstration this Sunday, Amnesty International urged today, amid fears that force may be used to prevent people from gathering.

Members of an opposition political party have been denied permission to hold the demonstration in Phnom Penh on 21 June.

“For too long, the streets of Phnom Penh have seen violence and bloodshed. It’s time for people of all political persuasions to recognise and respect each others’ right to gather peacefully and express their opinions – without fear for their safety,” Amnesty International said.

The demonstration has been organized by the Sam Rainsy Party to protest against alleged irregularities in the organization of elections due to take place on 26 July. A previous, authorised demonstration led by Sam Rainsy in March 1997 was the target of a grenade attack, in which at least 16 people died and more than 100 were injured. No one has ever been brought to justice for this attack and the Cambodian authorities have failed to carry out a credible investigation.

The ban on Sunday’s demonstration comes at a time of increased political tension in the country, with opposition parties complaining of political intimidation and voter registration irregularities. There have also been several reports of killings, which may have been politically motivated. Since July 1997, when Prince Norodom Ranariddh was violently removed from office, Amnesty International has documented scores of political killings, for which no one has ever been called to account.

Amnesty International also notes with concern the remarks by Second Prime Minister Hun Sen that immunity from prosecution may be offered to a senior Khmer Rouge leader in return for the handing over of other leaders of the group.

“Suspected human rights violators should not be used as bargaining chips,” Amnesty International urged. “Without accountability, there can be no justice. Without respect for human rights, there will be no progress.”

News of the ban on the demonstration comes as government representatives from the “Friends of Cambodia” group are meeting in Bangkok. It is vital that human rights form a central part of their discussions on Cambodia and that a strong, public position is taken against the ongoing political intimidation and violence. Until concrete steps are taken to ensure that all those suspected of involvement in human rights violations are called to account for their actions, the cycle of violations will continue.

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