

# KINGDOM OF CAMBODIA

## Grenade attack on peaceful demonstration

Amnesty International was shocked to learn of the grenade attack in Phnom Penh on 30 March 1997, on a peaceful, authorised demonstration of Khmer Nation Party (KNP) activists, in which as many as 19 people were killed and more than 100 injured. The incident occurred exactly 18 months after a similar attack on a gathering of Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP) followers, for which no one was ever brought to justice, and appears to be part of a pattern of increasing political tension and violence. Amnesty International fears for the safety of the leader of the KNP, Sam Rainsy, and his followers, in the light of yesterday's attack, and calls upon the Royal Government of Cambodia to ensure the safety of political party members and supporters exercising their fundamental right to freedom of association. The organization was particularly concerned to learn from eyewitnesses that police who gathered at the scene after the explosions did nothing to assist the wounded and dying, who were left lying in the sun for up to an hour after the incident, in spite of pleas from others to the police to use their many vehicles to transport the wounded to hospitals.

### The incident

A demonstration was called by the leadership of the KNP, to demand a reorganization of Cambodia's judicial system. Under Cambodian law, official permission is required for such events, and this had been obtained by the KNP from the Minister of Interior. A request was sent by the KNP on 26 March, and a letter from the two Interior Ministers, Sar Kheng and You Hok Kry, dated 29 March 1997, confirms that the demonstration could take place, with a slight modification to the route.

At about 7.40am on Sunday 30 March, between 150 and 170 demonstrators left the headquarters of the KNP and walked along the approved route until they reached the National Assembly building in Phnom Penh. The National Assembly is situated near the waterfront in Phnom Penh, very close to the Royal Palace and the Ministry of Justice. Sam Rainsy was at the front of the crowd, surrounded by Cambodian journalists and his bodyguards. He spoke to the crowd for about ten minutes, then a woman was invited to address the demonstrators about her dissatisfaction with a court verdict. At about 8.20am, two grenades exploded in the middle of the first row of people gathered around Sam Rainsy. All available information suggests that the target of the attack was Sam Rainsy himself, who escaped injury because one of his bodyguards pushed him down and took the force of the blast. He was killed. Two more grenades exploded at the back of the crowd, causing more deaths and injuries as people were attempting to flee from the direction of the first blasts. There are conflicting reports as to who threw these grenades. Several people said that two men

on foot, wearing civilian clothes threw grenades from the back of the crowd. There were apparently four grenades in total.

### **Lack of care**

In the immediate aftermath of the explosions, people ran away from the area. Eye-witnesses who arrived minutes after the grenades exploded told Amnesty International that dozens of police quickly gathered at the scene, and they began to cordon off the area, but did not seem to want to help the injured. One eye-witness said:

*“It took 40 minutes to move some of the most seriously injured. We asked the police to use their cars and transport the wounded [to hospital] and they refused.”*

Another eye-witness confirmed that police at the scene did not help the wounded and dying, and said that two people who were alive in the immediate aftermath were left out in the sun, without help and died at the scene. One seriously injured woman whose legs had been blown off was eventually picked up by the police and thrown onto the back of an open pick-up truck, which was then driven off without securing the victim, who was almost thrown off the back. She was declared dead on arrival at one of Phnom Penh’s hospitals.

Volunteers with medical expertise joined staff at Phnom Penh’s hospitals to treat the wounded, many of whom suffered serious injuries.

### **Cause for concern**

Amnesty International has received reliable reports about abnormalities in the way the security operation surrounding the demonstration was organized, which give serious cause for concern. The KNP has held many such demonstrations in recent months. They are usually heavily policed, especially in locations of national importance - of which the National Assembly is one. However, on 30 March, there were no police or military police at the National Assembly until the demonstrators arrived, and when they did appear, there were comparatively few of them - less than 30 - in contrast to earlier KNP demonstrations. Another anomaly was the presence some 200 metres behind the demonstrators of at least 15 heavily armed soldiers, who have not been present at previous KNP demonstrations. Several witnesses reported that two men who were seen throwing grenades then ran back towards the soldiers and were allowed through - the soldiers apparently made no attempt to apprehend these individuals, although a demonstrator who pursued them was prevented from getting through, and was forced to

turn back towards the crowd. It is a matter of great concern to Amnesty International that these heavily armed soldiers apparently did nothing to apprehend two men who were seen throwing grenades at the peaceful demonstrators, and yet they were prepared to halt the progress of someone trying to catch up with them.

## **Background**

The KNP is still not officially recognised as a legal political party by the Cambodian authorities, although it was founded in November 1995. Sam Rainsy, a former Finance Minister in the Royal Government of Cambodia was sacked in 1994, and expelled from his political party FUNCINPEC and the National Assembly in June 1995. Since then he has been Cambodia's most prominent opposition politician and a strident critic of the Royal Government and in particular of Second Prime Minister Hun Sen, the leader of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). In February 1997, Srun Vong Vannak, head of security for the KNP was arrested without a warrant in Phnom Penh and held in incommunicado detention for several weeks. Following domestic and international expressions of concern for his safety, the Cambodian authorities revealed that Srun Vong Vannak was being held on suspicion of involvement in the murder in November 1996 of Hun Sen's brother-in-law, Kov Samuth. Rumours circulated Phnom Penh that Sam Rainsy would be issued with a summons to appear before the investigating judge in connection with the case. In recent weeks there has been an increasingly highly-charged war of words between Hun Sen and Sam Rainsy conducted through the media. Political tension has been mounting, notably since the KNP became part of an electoral alliance with Sam Rainsy's old party FUNCINPEC, in preparation for elections due in 1998. This reconciliation between Sam Rainsy and the leader of FUNCINPEC, First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh has deepened the divisions in Cambodia's already fragile coalition government.

## **Condemnation of the attack**

Head of State King Norodom Sihanouk, who is currently in Beijing receiving medical treatment was quick to condemn the attack on the KNP demonstration, as was First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh. A spokesman for Second Prime Minister Hun Sen also issued a public condemnation. The Second Prime Minister himself made a speech on the radio in which he apparently called for the perpetrators to be brought to justice. However, in the same speech he also allegedly said that the Ministry of Interior should investigate the leaders of the demonstration, and arrest them if they were found to have acted illegally. Some commentators have interpreted his comments as a threat against Sam Rainsy. The two Prime Ministers have agreed to

set up an independent commission to investigate the grenade attack, although it is not clear at this stage who will be part of this group. The Ministry of Interior stated on Monday 31 March that they had as yet no information on who was responsible for the attack.

## **Recommendations**

Amnesty International is gravely concerned at the most recent political violence in Phnom Penh, which has left so many dead and injured. The organization also notes, with deep regret, that similar incidents have occurred in the recent past, for which no one has ever been brought to justice. The most serious human rights problem in Cambodia today is impunity - literally exemption from punishment - for human rights violators. It creates a climate where those who commit violations against people feel secure that they will never be held to account for their actions, and creates a downward cycle, in which ordinary people, who attempt to exercise their fundamental human rights end up living in fear. Cambodia is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Royal Government of Cambodia has an obligation to ensure that the human rights of all Cambodians are upheld. Amnesty International calls upon the Cambodian authorities to ensure that an immediate investigation is launched into the events of 30 March 1997, that the results of the investigation are made public and that those found to be responsible are brought to justice. Anything less than this will mean that the Royal Government is failing in its duties to protect the human rights of Cambodia's people.

