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CAMBODIA: NO PUBLIC CRITICISM OF GOVERNMENT ALLOWED

The recent murder of a newspaper editor underlines a renewed threat to freedom of expression and association in Cambodia, with the Royal Government becoming increasingly intolerant of criticism from political opponents and journalists, Amnesty International said today.

In the last year, prisoners of conscience have been detained for peaceful activities such as releasing balloons with leaflets attached calling for respect for human rights and newspaper editors have been put on trial for criticising the government. Opposition politicians have been threatened, intimidated and arrested and on one occasion hand grenades were thrown into a gathering of members of a political party.

“The repressive climate in which the government is forcing newspaper editors, journalists and opposition politicians to operate can only lead to one conclusion -- that the Royal Government is not prepared to tolerate public criticism,” Amnesty International said.

Thun Bun Ly, a member of the *Cheat Khmae* (Khmer Nation Party), who had been prosecuted and convicted twice on charges relating to the peaceful political critiques he had published in his newspaper *Oddomkete Khmae* (“Khmer Ideal”), was assassinated on 18 May. That morning, he telephoned a friend to express fears about his safety. After his death, municipal police and a man from the Ministry of the Interior reportedly arrived on two separate occasions to remove bullets from his body.

Thun Bun Ly was interviewed in November 1995 by Amnesty International for its report - *Kingdom of Cambodia: Diminishing Respect for Human Rights*, when he expressed his concerns about the threats to democracy.

“I have been threatened by soldiers and police who keep me under surveillance, and people who know me say I should stop publishing,” he said. “But the newspaper is my sweat and blood. I won’t forsake it. I want to do whatever I can so that Cambodia has democracy the same as other people in the world there is less democracy if we can’t print.”

Amnesty International’s 63-page report also highlights the case of prominent government critic Prince Norodom Sirivudh. An elected member of the National Assembly, he was arrested and detained in November 1995 in violation of Cambodia’s own laws, and charged with plotting to assassinate the Second Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Prince Sirivudh was exiled to France; his trial *in absentia* fell far short of minimum international standards, and he was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment. Amnesty International believes that his trial and conviction were politically motivated.

“Thun Bun Ly’s death is a tragic illustration of the threat to human rights in Cambodia,” Amnesty International said. “Until the Cambodian government accepts peaceful criticism of its

policies, human rights for the majority of Cambodians will remain nothing more than an abstract concept.”

“The international community has made an enormous investment in rebuilding Cambodian civil society. It cannot stand by and watch the Royal Government squander this new start in the area of human rights.”

The report also documents cases of torture and ill-treatment of people in detention, such as Heng At, a policeman who spent more than three months in detention for making remarks critical of the First Prime Minister, and who was severely beaten at the time of his arrest. When Amnesty International interviewed him in detention two months later in December 1995, his face was still bruised from the blows.

An appendix to the report lists all the cases of human rights violations in Cambodia since 1993 which Amnesty International has brought to the attention of the Royal Government. The vast majority remain unresolved. In spite of improved human rights training for military and police personnel, those who commit human rights violations are rarely brought to justice, the organization said.

Amnesty International is urging the Cambodian authorities to take immediate action on the cases raised in this report, and on the unresolved cases from the recent past.

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If you would like a copy of the full report, Kingdom of Cambodia: Diminishing Respect for Human Rights, more information on Amnesty International’s concerns in Cambodia or to arrange an interview, please contact:

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