

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# CAMBODIA: HARASSMENT OF FOREST DEFENDERS UNDERMINES STRUGGLE AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE

The Cambodian authorities' harassment and intimidation of environmental human rights defenders amounts to a wholesale assault against grassroots activism and Indigenous peoples' rights and undercuts the global struggle against climate change, Amnesty International said today ahead of the International Day of Forests 2020.

In recent days and weeks, activists working to expose rampant illegal logging in the Prey Lang rainforest have faced a barrage of attacks, including arbitrary detention and physical assaults, by both state authorities and corporate actors. Prey Lang is one of the most ecologically important rainforests in Southeast Asia and home to Kuy Indigenous communities. Efforts to repress the work of Prey Lang's defenders cast serious doubt upon the Cambodian authorities' commitment to achieving its climate change targets and respecting Indigenous peoples' rights.

On 13 March in Kratie Province, Goldman Environmental Prize winner Ouch Leng was arrested and detained along with Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN) members Srey Thei and Khem Soky and forest investigator Man Mat. The four were initially detained, with Man Mat beaten, by staff of an agribusiness company operating in the area while investigating allegations of illegal logging within the Prey Lang forest. Later transferred to police custody at Sambor district police station, they were released without charge on Monday 16 March after days of community protests against the arrests in Kratie town. They reportedly remain under investigation as suspects for unspecified crimes.

Amnesty International is calling for the baseless investigation into the four forest activists to be dropped and for the Cambodian authorities to conduct a thorough and impartial investigation into all credible allegations of arbitrary detention, torture and illegal logging by agribusiness companies operating in the area.

These arrests occurred just weeks after PLCN – a grassroots network of mostly Indigenous forest defenders - was accused of operating illegally and of peddling false information about illegal logging by the Cambodian Ministry of Environment. PLCN has been at the forefront of environmental protection efforts in Cambodia since its formation in 2001. They have bravely defended Prey Lang while many of Cambodia's forests have been plundered as officials either profited from, or ignored, rampant deforestation.

On 22 February, at various locations around the Prey Lang forest, armed forest rangers deployed by the Ministry of Environment harassed members of PLCN and others seeking to participate in PLCN's annual tree blessing ceremony. The event was arbitrarily shut down, and attendees were physically prevented from entering parts of the Prey Lang protected area in violation of their right to freedom of peaceful assembly. PLCN members reported that rangers violently restricted their movements and that at least one member was temporarily detained during the confrontation.

Ministry of Environment officials claimed in social media posts and media comments following the incident that PLCN is operating illegally because it has not registered under Cambodia's widely criticised Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO). Officials further accused the network of issuing inaccurate reports about deforestation in Prey Lang. The Ministry's claims that PLCN is operating illegally contradict earlier written assurances from Cambodia's Ministry of Interior, which stated that the LANGO does not apply to community-based and grassroots networks.

These threats against PLCN are the latest example of the weaponization of the LANGO to stifle and repress independent civil society and grassroots activism. This draconian law claims to protect the right to freedom of association, yet the LANGO has overwhelmingly been utilised to restrict and punish the work of independent and outspoken civil society actors. Amnesty International reiterates its calls to repeal or substantially amend the LANGO without delay to ensure it is brought in line with international human rights law, and to guarantee a safe and enabling environment for environmental human rights defenders to conduct their work without fear of reprisals.

## BACKGROUND

Prey Lang is mainland Southeast Asia's largest lowland evergreen forest covering approximately 500,000 hectares and spanning four of Cambodia's provinces - Kampong Thom, Kratie, Stung Treng, and Preah Vihear. The forest is a biodiversity hotspot which is home to many endangered species of animals and plants, making it a region of global environmental importance.

More than 250,000 people live in and around Prey Lang, most of whom identify as Indigenous Kuy. Prey Lang means "our forest" in the Kuy language and Indigenous peoples have sustainably relied on the forest for generations. Prey Lang is a crucial part of Kuy culture and spiritual life and serves as a vital resource for Kuy people's livelihoods. Prey Lang was designated as a Wildlife Sanctuary in 2016 and timber exports from the forest were banned.

Despite this designation, Prey Lang remains under serious threat due to rampant illegal logging. PLCN have reported 41,758 hectares of forest loss between 2001 and 2018, equating to almost 10% of the Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary. In late 2019, one of the largest companies operating in the area, Think Biotech, was subject of a joint investigation by the Cambodian Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries following allegations of illegal logging of indigenous people's ancestral forests located outside the boundaries of the company's land concession in Prey Lang.

The conservation of Earth's remaining rainforests is essential to any hope of preventing catastrophic damage caused by climate change. The United Nations has stated that "[e]liminating emissions from deforestation ... could reduce global net emissions by up to 30 per cent".<sup>1</sup> The Cambodian government's Climate Change Strategic Plan 2014 – 2023 also includes "conservation and management of forest resources in a sustainable manner" as one of its objectives.<sup>2</sup>

PLCN was established in 2001 by local community members who were concerned at the devastating scale of illegal logging which they witnessed in Prey Lang. Its members are part-time volunteers who take significant risks to patrol the forests in order to monitor and deter illegal logging and poaching. PLCN has won multiple international awards, including the UNDP Equator Initiative Prize at COP21 in Paris in 2015 and the Alexander Soros Foundation Annual Award in 2013.

Environmental defenders risk their lives to protect Cambodia's forests. In May 2012, Chut Wutty – one of Prey Lang's most prominent defenders and a close partner of PLCN and Ouch Leng – was shot dead by military police working with a private company when he sought to uncover forest crimes in Koh Kong province.

The LANGO was introduced in August 2015 amid heavy criticism from international and Cambodian human rights organisations. Prior to the law's adoption, Amnesty International called for the rejection of the LANGO, citing inconsistencies with the right to freedom of association and the potential impacts on grassroots activism.<sup>3</sup> The United Nations' human rights office has stated that the LANGO's mandatory registration regime violates Cambodia's obligations to protect the right to freedom of association, enshrined in the Cambodian Constitution and international human rights law.<sup>4</sup> Penalties for conducting activities in the absence of registration under the LANGO include bans on activity, fines, and can lead to the criminal prosecution of members.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Environment Programme, <https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/forests/why-do-forests-matter>

<sup>2</sup> Royal Government of Cambodia, Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan 2014 – 2023, [https://www.cambodiaip.gov.kh/DocResources/ab9455cf-9eea-4adc-ae93-95d149c6d78c\\_007729c5-60a9-47f0-83ac-7f70420b9a34-en.pdf](https://www.cambodiaip.gov.kh/DocResources/ab9455cf-9eea-4adc-ae93-95d149c6d78c_007729c5-60a9-47f0-83ac-7f70420b9a34-en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Cambodia: Withdraw draft Law on Associations and Non-governmental Organizations (Index: ASA 23/1909/2015), 22 June 2015.

<sup>4</sup> OHCHR Analysis of LANGO, August 2015, Article 3,

[https://cambodia.ohchr.org/~cambodiaohchr/sites/default/files/OHCHR\\_analysis\\_of\\_5th\\_LANGO\\_Eng.pdf](https://cambodia.ohchr.org/~cambodiaohchr/sites/default/files/OHCHR_analysis_of_5th_LANGO_Eng.pdf)