

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 23/009/2004 (Public)  
News Service No: 299  
3 December 2004

**Embargo Date: 3 December 2004 00:01 GMT**

## **Cambodia: Trade unionist's murder shows up judicial flaws**

Next week Cambodia's donors will once again meet to decide on the international aid budget to the country. Part of this funding will be for the judicial sector. The Cambodian authorities have not been able to meet even one of the benchmarks set by donors in 2002 to encourage improvements in this sector. The judiciary remains weak, corrupt and susceptible to political interference.

An Amnesty International report issued today gives the background to the murder of Cambodia's foremost independent trade union leader and the lamentable investigation into his death for which no one has yet been brought to justice.

"Chea Vichea's assassination on 22 January 2004 and the subsequent investigation exemplifies much that is wrong with the Cambodian judicial system" said Natalie Hill, Deputy Asia Director at Amnesty International. "His death has also shone a spotlight onto his struggle for the rights of workers, mostly women, in the garment industry."

"We believe the most serious human rights problem in Cambodia is impunity - the state allowing people to get away with human rights abuses including killings," said Ms Hill. "As with many other politically motivated killings, there are serious doubts about the case against the suspects, including allegations that their confessions were extracted under torture."

"As a result of the climate of impunity, members of the police and military can impose their will and commit abuses against civilians, safe in the knowledge that they will never be called to account for their actions," continued Ms Hill.

The investigation into Chea Vichea's death has been marred by failures at every level of the justice system. Police have used torture and intimidation towards suspects and witnesses. Eyewitnesses disagreed that the men charged with the murder resembled the actual killer. Witnesses feared for their safety and some went into hiding. "Particularly worrying is the treatment of the judge appointed to the case," said Ms Hill. "After dismissing the case because of lack of evidence, he was publicly criticized by the body which oversees the judiciary and was transferred from his position."

Chea Vichea was president of one of the largest unions in Cambodia which faced great obstacles from both factory owners and the authorities. He campaigned for better working conditions, such as reduced working hours, particularly for garment factory workers. The garment industry represents around 36 per cent of the Cambodian economy and employs 200,000 workers.

"Sadly, Chea Vichea's murder was not a one-off," said Ms Hill. "In the last 15 years, while the international community has poured money into Cambodia to rebuild the war-torn country, hundreds of political killings -- including of journalists and political activists -- have gone unpunished. Many of these people gave their lives trying to rebuild the country. When will the government match words with deeds and restore the faith of the Cambodian people in Cambodian justice?"

To see the report, *The killing of trade unionist Chea Vichea*, please go to:  
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa230082004>.

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