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Cambodia: Call for restraint after detention of prominent opposition leader

Amnesty International today called for restraint on all sides after last night's grenade and shooting attack in which one person was killed, and opposition politician Sam Rainsy and a group of his supporters were detained and questioned.

"More violence is not going to solve Cambodia's current political problems," Amnesty International said today. "Everyone involved in the political process has a responsibility to prevent an escalation of tensions."

The attack and the subsequent detention took place late at night in Phnom Penh, at the Ministry of Interior compound, where the National Election Committee (NEC) is located. Opposition parties in Cambodia are challenging the results of the 26 July elections, and Sam Rainsy had publicly stated his intention to sleep outside the NEC, where the ballots are being stored.

At 11pm a grenade was thrown and several shots fired, close to the area where Sam Rainsy had been talking to journalists less than half an hour earlier. A Cambodian driver for the Japanese Kyodo news agency was killed.

Rainsy and his supporters were detained at gunpoint and questioned about the attack for several hours. A Ministry of Interior spokesman reportedly indicated today that the Ministry intends to pursue legal action against Sam Rainsy. The likely charges against him are not known.

This turn of events in Cambodia raises fears of further violence against political activists, in particular because opposition parties disputing the election results, including the Sam Rainsy Party, plan to hold a large demonstration in Phnom Penh on Sunday 23 August. The Ministry of Interior have refused to grant official permission to the organizers of the protest.

"The Cambodian authorities must uphold the right of Cambodian people to peaceful assembly," Amnesty International said. "No one's security is threatened by a peaceful protest, but attempting to prevent or break up such a protest could threaten the lives of many."

The organization also appealed to members of the international diplomatic community in Cambodia to send representatives to the planned demonstration to observe the proceedings, and ensure that the basic rights of Cambodian people are upheld.

"The international community has invested a great deal in Cambodia, and helped to fund the recent elections. It is in everyone's interests to ensure that the political process -- already severely tainted -- does not descend even further into violence," Amnesty International said.

BACKGROUND

The human rights climate in Cambodia deteriorated sharply following a grenade attack on a peaceful opposition demonstration organized by Sam Rainsy in March 1997. At least 16 people died and more than 100 were injured. No serious investigations into the incident have been undertaken by the government authorities.

Scores of people were extrajudicially executed during a coup in July last year in which FUNCINPEC First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh was ousted from power. Most of the victims were high-ranking FUNCINPEC military and security personnel. No one has been brought to justice for any of these killings, although in a blatantly unfair trial the Phnom Penh Military court imposed a post-mortem sentence of 20 years' imprisonment on one of those killed.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, thousands of opposition politicians and supporters, mainly from FUNCINPEC and the Sam Rainsy Party, fled the country. Although political party activists later returned to participate in the election, thousands of FUNCINPEC officers and troops remain on the Cambodian-Thai border. Dozens of FUNCINPEC security personnel who stayed in Cambodia have been killed over the past year.

Elections took place on 26 July 1998, and the opposition has been challenging the results, which give the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) a majority of the vote and the largest number of seats in the National Assembly. In the immediate aftermath of the polls, scores of opposition party activists fled their homes in fear of their lives, following threats and intimidation from government security personnel and CPP party agents.

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