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Cambodia: call for restraint during demonstrations

Amnesty International today condemned the deaths and injuries of demonstrators resulting from the repression of opposition protests by security force in Phnom Penh this week. "We fear an escalation of violence and call on all sides in the current political crisis to exercise restraint, and to make efforts to resolve their differences peacefully," the organization said.

Security forces are reported to have shot at and beaten a group of Buddhist monks and some students demonstrating close to the United States Embassy today. One Buddhist monk is known to have been killed, while others were injured.

On 8 September security forces violently dispersed demonstrators at different locations in Phnom Penh, shooting into the air and beating people, reportedly using electric batons and water hoses. Suppression of the demonstrations continued this morning in the city.

On 7 September one person was shot dead after police attempted to violently disperse a demonstration in support of opposition party leader Sam Rainsy. Early on that day three grenades were thrown at the residence of Second Prime Minister Hun Sen while he was away; two exploded but there were no casualties.

Second Prime Minister Hun Sen announced that he was ordering the arrest of opposition party leader Sam Rainsy in connection with the attack and for holding illegal demonstrations. He also demanded that the demonstrations end by midnight on 7 September. Sam Rainsy subsequently sought sanctuary in the office of the UN Secretary General's representative in Phnom Penh, where he remains.

Amnesty International urges that a proper and full investigation be carried out into the grenade attack to bring those responsible to justice. The attack, however, should not be used as a pretext to crack down on peaceful dissent and the right to freedom of expression and association.

"Peoples' lives are yet again being put at risk in Phnom Penh. The use of violence by the police to disperse demonstrators is unacceptable and should be avoided at all costs. It only serves to provoke and increase tension in an already volatile situation," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International also calls on the international community -- including the European Union (EU), ASEAN members and other countries who are part of the Friends of Cambodia group -- to condemn the killings and to firmly urge the Cambodian Government to ensure the protection of human rights and freedom of peaceful assembly and expression.

Background

Opposition parties have challenged the results of the July 1998 election, in which the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) of Second Prime Minister Hun Sen obtained the majority of votes and of seats in the National Assembly. In the immediate aftermath of the polls, scores of opposition party activists fled their homes fearing for their lives, following threats and intimidation from government security personnel. Mass demonstrations by opposition supporters have been taking place in Phnom Penh for the last two weeks in protest at reported irregularities in the July elections.

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