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*amnesty international*

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# **£KINGDOM OF CAMBODIA**

## **@Political violence in Phnom Penh**

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Amnesty International was gravely concerned by grenade attacks in Phnom Penh on 30 September at the house of Son Sann, founder of the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP), in which more than 30 people were injured. Political violence on this scale has not been seen in the country since before the elections organized by the United Nations in 1993.

The organization fears for the safety of Son Sann and his followers, particularly as some of them have received death threats in the recent past.

### **Background**

Factionalism within the BLDP recently led to a split in the party, with one faction led by Son Sann, and another faction led by Ieng Mouly. Ieng Mouly is the Minister for Information in Cambodia's coalition government, and the two Prime Ministers, Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen have recognised him as president of the BLDP. In a party congress called by the Mouly faction in July, Son Sann and his supporters, including several MPs were expelled from the party. However, the BLDP faction loyal to Son Sann decided to hold a party congress on 1 October, and requested permission from the Minister of Interior to hold this meeting in the Phnom Penh Olympic Stadium. Amnesty International understands that permission to use the Olympic Stadium for the congress was denied by the Ministry of Interior, unless the Son Sann faction of the BLDP could demonstrate reconciliation with the Ieng Mouly faction.<sup>1</sup> Son Sann's group instead decided to hold their congress at Son Sann's house which is near the Olympic Stadium.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Phnom Penh Post* "Son Sann strives for the right to hold his congress" 22 September to 5 October 1995.

## **Grenade attack**

Just after 6pm in the afternoon of Saturday 30 September, a crowd of Son Sann's supporters, most of whom had travelled to Phnom Penh from the provinces for the party congress, were gathered around his house. Witnesses report that two people on a motorbike drove by the house, and apparently rolled a grenade into the crowd. The grenade exploded, and many people were injured, including some who apparently were hurt in the panic as people tried to flee. Shortly after this explosion, a second grenade exploded in the grounds of a nearby Buddhist temple, Wat Moha Montrei, where many of Son Sann's supporters were staying. At least 30 people were injured in the two explosions. Witnesses who spoke to Amnesty International reported that the police did not arrive on the scene of the explosions for about 30 minutes, and that people with cars were transporting victims to the hospital for emergency treatment. Talking to journalists at the scene Son Sann (who is over 80 years old), spoke of the threat to his party and to democracy in Cambodia, while people around him attempted to clear the blood and debris from the floor of his house.

## **The Congress**

In spite of the grenade attacks on the 30 September, Son Sann and his BLDP supporters took the decision to go ahead with their meeting on 1 October. More than one thousand people attended the meeting on Sunday morning, where Son Sann was confirmed as BLDP President by his supporters. The United States Ambassador to Cambodia, Charles Twining called at the house, which is also the party headquarters, and condemned the attack. Witnesses reported to Amnesty International that shortly after this visit, a large contingent of armed military police moved into the vicinity of Son Sann's house, blocked off the road, and forced people to leave the area, and the meeting was quickly closed.

## **Condemnation**

King Norodom Sihanouk condemned the attack on the Son Sann BLDP faction in a message sent from Beijing, and First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh issued a statement on 1 October condemning the attack. A spokesman for the Ieng Mouly faction of the BLDP joined the condemnation, stating that the party was against violence of any kind. Minister of Interior You Hok Kry, speaking for the government said whoever was found to be responsible for the attack would be brought to justice following a thorough investigation. Cambodian human rights groups have also issued a statement condemning the attack and calling for an investigation. According to a police spokesman no progress had been made in identifying those responsible by 2 October.

## **Recommendations**

Amnesty International is concerned that the right to freedom of association is increasingly under threat in Cambodia. The grenade attack on the supporters of the Son Sann faction of the BLDP underlines the fears that people in Cambodia who have criticised the government or who do not agree with the line taken by government ministers may be at risk. Prominent politicians, including BLDP member Kem Sokha, who is a Son Sann supporter have received threats to their safety in the recent past. Amnesty International also notes with concern remarks apparently made by Ieng Mouly in an interview with the English language newspaper the *Phnom Penh Post*, in the edition of 22 September, where he is quoted as saying that even if his own supporters and Son Sann's supporters went peacefully to the same congress, there could be "bad elements from outside who want to...create some problems? They may throw three hand grenades and then they can accuse me, they can accuse the government."<sup>2</sup>

In the light of the attack, and the remarks reportedly made by a government minister, Amnesty International calls upon the Royal Government of Cambodia to ensure the safety of political party members and supporters, particularly those who have been subjected to attacks and threats, and to reconfirm its commitment to freedom of association, as guaranteed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Cambodia is a signatory. The organization welcomes the statement made by the Minister of Interior that a thorough investigation will be carried out into the grenade attacks, and recommends that the results of this inquiry be made public, and that those implicated in the investigation be brought to justice.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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