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Cambodia: New activist arrest as government pressures courts

The Cambodian government must end its manipulation of the courts, said Amnesty International today after yet another activist critical of the government was charged with defamation.

"The situation is deteriorating sharply and there is a real risk that other activists will be arrested on similarly politically motivated charges," said Brittis Edman, South East Asia researcher at Amnesty International.

Pa Nguon Teang, deputy president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, was charged with defamation and sent to prison earlier today, after being arrested in the north-eastern province of Stung Treng yesterday.

"The right to freedom of expression is being fundamentally undermined, with the government increasingly using the courts as a tool to stifle criticism," said Brittis Edman.

"The government cannot lay the blame for this on the courts. It is manipulating the justice system itself and in doing so is undermining the credibility and independence of the judiciary."

Six prominent political and civil activists are now behind bars in Phnom Penh prisons. All six had been the subject of complaints lodged on behalf of the Prime Minister Hun Sen or other members of the government.

The president of Pa Nguon Teang's organisation, Kem Sokha, was arrested on 31 December, along with Yeng Virak, Director of the Community Legal Education Centre. Both were charged with criminal defamation over a banner used in a rally to mark International Human Rights Day on 10 December.

"It is a bitter irony that these individuals were arrested in connection with a human rights rally," said Brittis Edman. "The Cambodian government must show its commitment to human rights by restoring the right to freedom of expression and withdrawing the criminal complaints against those who have been arrested."

Amnesty International is concerned that other members of the rally organising committee and the 63 NGOs it represented are also at risk of arrest.

Background

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights and the Community Legal Education Centre were two NGOs on the organising committee of a public rally to mark International Human Rights Day on 10 December 2005. Thousands of people attended the rally and some wrote comments on a banner. The defamation charges stem from one such hand-written comment, which allegedly accused Prime Minister Hun Sen of 'selling land' to Viet Nam.

In October 2005 radio manager Mam Sonando and union leader Rong Chhun were arrested and charged with criminal defamation and other charges over a radio interview and statement which expressed criticism of the government's policy in relation to a border agreement with Viet Nam. The two men remain in pre-trial detention and face prison sentences of several years if found guilty. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience.

On 22 December 2005 opposition leader Sam Rainsy was convicted in absentia of defaming Prime Minister Hum Sen and the President of the National Assembly Prince Norodom Ranariddh. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison and remains in exile.

Public Document

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