

The Cambodian Government Must Stop Beating and Arresting Peaceful Protesters

August 18, 2020 – We, the undersigned civil society groups, strongly condemn the Cambodian authorities' use of violence against peaceful demonstrators and the recent arrests of more than a dozen activists.

Over the past few weeks, authorities have waged an increasingly brutal crackdown on peaceful protests that began after the arrest and imprisonment of union leader Rong Chhun at the start of August. Since Chhun's arrest, six more individuals have been sent to pre-trial detention after advocating for his release. Authorities have also beaten and arrested relatives, most of whom are women, of former members of the dissolved opposition party who were protesting against their family members' arrests.

It is not a crime to call for your family to be released from prison. It is not a crime to speak out against your friends' arrest. It is not a crime to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with people in your community and demand justice. All Cambodians have the right to peacefully protest without being shoved, beaten or dragged off by police. We call on the government to immediately release those arrested, drop charges against them and fully respect the Cambodian people's rights to free expression and assembly.

Chhun was arrested at his home during the night and remains in detention in response to comments he made about communities along the Vietnam border. Just days before his arrest he had joined a demonstration with hundreds of garment workers following the factory's closure due to COVID-19.

On Thursday evening, six activists were arrested in Phnom Penh after repeatedly calling for the union leader's release. Youth activist Chhoeun Daravy, who has a long history of social justice work and environmental activism, was dragged into a van by her hair after her belongings were forcibly seized by district security forces during the peaceful protest. Environmental activist Hun Vannak was later arrested by plainclothes officers mid-livestream while walking home from the demonstration.

Both activists were charged with "incitement to commit a felony" under articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code, which is punishable by up to two years in prison. Vannak is detained in Phnom Penh's Correctional Centre 1 (CC1), whilst Daravy is in Correctional Centre 2 (CC2). The other four activists were released from custody after being pressured into signing contracts pledging not to take part in similar demonstrations.

The week before, four other activists linked to the forcibly dissolved opposition party were arrested in the capital after joining protests calling for Rong Chhun's freedom. Two of them, Chhuo Peng and Chum Puthy, were also charged with incitement and detained at CC1. Eight Buddhist monks who had travelled from Battambang to join the demonstration were stopped by police and forced to return to their pagoda. Another activist, Sar Kanika, was arrested after joining protests for Rong Chhun's release on 7 August and also charged with incitement before being detained in CC2.

Last Friday, Khmer Win Party leader Soung Sophorn was arrested and charged with incitement. He is currently detained in CC1. Sophorn has publicly called for the release of Rong Chhun, and was arrested shortly after visiting the same posts on the Vietnam border that Chhun viewed prior to his arrest.

This is the third time Hun Vannak has been arrested for his activism in recent years. He spent five

months behind bars between 2017 and 2018 for documenting suspected illicit sand-dredging. Earlier this year, in May, he was held in custody for several hours after protesting for debt-relief from banks and microfinance institutions amid the global pandemic.

While this wave of arrests was sparked by Rong Chhun's jailing, police and security forces have been increasingly violent in their suppression of peaceful assemblies. In the past several weeks, relatives of a number of imprisoned former opposition party members who have publicly called for their family members' release have been shoved, kicked and dragged across the pavement by armed security.

Authorities have also drawn upon an increasingly wide range of excuses to keep protestors off the streets. On 3 August, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Justice issued a statement attempting to silence any protests which express an opinion about cases before the courts. The statement threatened legal action against protestors calling for the union leader's release, labeling their peaceful protests an act of unlawful coercion of judicial authorities, which is punishable under article 522 of the Criminal Code by up to six months in prison. The same day, the Municipality of Phnom Penh issued an instruction declaring that the demonstrations had been contrary to measures to contain COVID-19, in seemingly a further effort to disrupt protests.

We call on Cambodian authorities to immediately release those who have been imprisoned for exercising their constitutional rights, drop charges against them and stop all violence against protesters.

Signed,

1. 197 Land Community (Koh Kong)
2. Affiliated Network for Social Accountability (ANSA)
3. Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT)
4. Activities for Environment Community (AEC)
5. Am Leang Community (Kampong Speu)
6. Andong Trabek Land Community (Svay Rieng)
7. Boeung Pram Community (Battambang)
8. Building Community Voices (BCV)
9. Buddhism for Peace Organization (BPO)
10. Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU)
11. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
12. Cambodia Institute of Democracy (CID)
13. Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation (CFSWF)
14. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
15. Cambodia's Independent Civil Servants Association (CICA)
16. Coalition for Integrity and Social Accountability (CISA)
17. Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (C. CAWDU)
18. Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC)
19. Cambodian Independent Teachers' Association (CITA)
20. Cambodian Informal Economy Workers Association (CIWA)
21. Cambodian Labor Confederation (CLC)
22. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
23. Cambodian Tourism and Service Workers Federation (CTSWF)
24. Cambodia Youth and Monk Network (CYMN)
25. Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
26. Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL)

27. Chek Meas Land Community (Svay Rieng)
28. Chi Kha Kraom Land Community (Koh Kong)
29. Chi Kha Leu Land Community (Koh Kong)
30. Choam Kravien Community (Tbong Khmum)
31. Chray Indigenous Community (Ratanakiri)
32. Coalition of Cambodian Farmers Community Association (CCFC)
33. Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL)
34. Community to Protect Nature (Pursat)
35. Dak Por Community (Kampong Speu)
36. Equitable Cambodia (EC)
37. Gender and Development Cambodia (GADC)
38. Haong Samnam Community (Kampong Speu)
39. Indigenous Youth for Community Ratanakiri
40. Indigenous Community in Prame Commune (Preah Vihear)
41. Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
42. Independent Monk Network for Social Justice (IMNSJ)
43. Indradevi Association (IDA)
44. Kouy Indigenous Community (Preah Vihear)
45. Khmer Kampuchea Krom For Human Rights and Development Association (KKKHRDA)
46. Klaing Toek 78 Community (Siem Reap)
47. Koh Sralao Fishery Community (Koh Kong)
48. Labour Right Supported Union Khmer Employee of Nagaworld (L.R.S.U)
49. Land Community (Pailin)
50. Lor Peang Land Community (Kampong Chhnang)
51. Mean Chey Land Community (Svay Rieng)
52. Minority Rights Organization (MIRO)
53. Mother Nature Cambodia (MNC)
54. Neutral and Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (NICFEC)
55. Not 1 More (N1M)
56. Ou Vor Preng Community (Battambang)
57. Peace Bridges Organization (PBO)
58. Phnom Krom Community (Siem Reap)
59. Phum Sela Khmer Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)
60. Phum Phsar Kandal Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)
61. Ponlok Khmer (PKH)
62. Prey Lang Community (Kampong Thom)
63. Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN)
64. Prey Peay Fishery Community (Kampot)
65. Prey Chher Pich Sangva Laor Chhert Community (Kampong Chnang)
66. Raksmeay Samaki Community (Kampong Speu)
67. Rattanak Rokha Forestry Community (Oddar Meanchey)
68. Rural Cambodia Technological Support Organisation (RCTSO)
69. Sahmakum Teang Thaut (STT)
70. SAMKY Organization
71. Samaki Romeas Haek Community (Svay Rieng)
72. Sre Ampel Water Fall Tourism Forestry Community (Kampong Chnang)
73. Sre Prang Community (Tbong Khmum)
74. Steung Khsach Sor Forestry Resource Community (Kampong Chnang)
75. Ta Noun Land Community (Koh Kong)
76. The Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW (NGO-CEDAW)
77. Trapeang Chour Community (Kampong Speu)
78. Transparency International Cambodia (TI)
79. Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP)