

Drop All Charges Against Mother Nature Activists, Release Imprisoned Rights Activists

The Phnom Penh Municipal Court on Sunday charged four members of the Mother Nature environmental movement with plotting an attack against the state and insulting the king, part of the targeted and outrageous persecution of frontline environmental defenders and grassroots activists by the government. Authorities should stop imprisoning and start listening to our youth activists who are on the front line of documenting the risks Cambodia faces from natural resource exploitation and environmental degradation. These activists are tirelessly and selflessly working for the nation's best interests.

We, the undersigned communities and civil society groups, demand the immediate release of the arrested environmental activists, dropping of all charges, and a halt to the relentless repression and prosecution of the environmental movement.

Sun Ratha, Yim Leanghy and Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson were charged with plotting and insulting the king (lèse majesté) under articles 453 and 437 (bis) of the Cambodian Criminal Code, which carry maximum prison sentences of 10 years and 5 years, respectively. A fourth activist, Ly Chandaravuth, was charged with plotting.

Three of the activists were sent to pre-trial detention in Phnom Penh's Correctional Centers 1 and 2 on 21 June, while Gonzalez-Davidson remains outside the country after he was deported in 2015.

Ratha and Chandaravuth were arrested on Phnom Penh's riverside along with Seth Chhivlimeng, who was later released. The trio were documenting runoff from drainpipes along the river. At the same time, Kandal province's Koh Thom district authorities summonsed environmental activist Yim Leanghy for questioning and arrested him, later transferring him to Phnom Penh. The whereabouts of the four activists were kept secret for at least 24 hours after their initial arrest, putting undue stress on their families and depriving them access to prompt legal counsel.

The three activists were then brought to the Phnom Penh Municipal Court and questioned by the prosecutor on 19 June and charged on 20 June, with the plotting and insulting the king charges leaked to pro-government media even before they were conveyed to the activists' lawyers. This type of subterfuge undermines the activists' right to a fair trial.

Leanghy is a 32-year-old student who obtained a scholarship to study for a Master's degree at the Royal University of Phnom Penh's Institute of Foreign Languages. Ratha is a 26-year-old accountant who graduated from the University of Cambodia, where she was also studying on a scholarship. Chandaravuth is a 22-year-old law student in his 4th year of studying law at the Royal University of Law and Economics.

Their arrests are unfounded and the charges are baseless, and are yet another example of the Cambodian government and judiciary using trumped-up charges to imprison young human rights defenders. Advocating for human rights and demanding that the authorities protect the environment are not crimes, and jailing the country's future generation of environmental defenders imperils us all.

The arrests come less than two months after the conviction of three other Mother Nature activists in May 2021, for baseless charges of incitement. Thun Ratha, Phuon Keoraksmeay and Long Kunthea were convicted and sentenced to 18 to 20 months in prison for planning a one-woman march in Phnom Penh to advocate against the filling-in of Boeung Tamok, which has been carved out piecemeal to private interests and state institutions. Gonzalez-Davidson and another activist, Chea Kunthin, were also convicted in absentia.

In 2020, the government arrested at least 16 youth activists for protesting the detention of unionist Rong Chhun, who was arrested and charged with incitement for comments he made about the Cambodia-Vietnam border.

As overcrowded prisons across the country struggle with a COVID-19 outbreak, the government appears intent on arresting anyone who voices dissent or protests peacefully. The courts have shown little inclination to release people convicted for non-violent crimes early or on bail, but instead continue to incarcerate peaceful activists, putting their health at risk.

We demand that the members of the Mother Nature movement, and all environmental and human rights activists currently imprisoned, be released immediately and all charges against them dropped without condition.

Signed by:

1. 197 Land Community (Koh Kong)
2. Am Leang Community (Kampong Speu)
3. Affiliated Network for Social Accountability (ANSA)
4. Andong Trabek Land Community (Svay Rieng)
5. Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT)
6. Activities for Environment Community (AEC)
7. Building Community Voices (BCV)
8. Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU)
9. Cambodian Labor Confederation (CLC)
10. Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation (CFSWF)
11. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
12. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
13. Cambodia Development People Life Association (CDPLA)
14. Cambodia's Independent Civil Servants Association (CICA)
15. Cambodian Independent Teachers' Association (CITA)
16. Cambodian Informal Economy Workers Association (CIWA-CLC)
17. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)

18. Cambodian Tourism Workers Union Federation (CTWUF)
19. Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
20. Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL)
21. Chak Krey Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)
22. Chi Kha Kraom Land Community (Koh Kong)
23. Chi Kha Leu Land Community (Koh Kong)
24. Chray Indigenous Community (Ratanakiri)
25. Choam Kravien Community (Tboung Khmum)
26. Coalition for Integrity and Social Accountability (CISA)
27. Coalition of Cambodian Farmers Community Association (CCFC)
28. Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL)
29. Community Peace-Building Network (CPN)
30. Community to Protect Nature (Pursat)
31. Dak Por Community (Kampong Speu)
32. Equitable Cambodia (EC)
33. Federation of Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC)
34. H.C.C Employees Union
35. Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
36. Independent Trade Union Federation (INTUFE)
37. Indigenous Community in Prame Commune (Preah Vihear)
38. Khmer Kampuchea Krom For Human Rights and Development Association (KKKHRDA)
39. Kleang Toek 78 Community (Siemreap)
40. Koh Sralao Fishery Community (Koh Kong)
41. Labour Right Supported Union Khmer Employee of Nagaworld (L.R.S.U)
42. Land Community (Pailin)
43. Lor Peang Land Community (Kampong Chhnang)
44. Mean Chey Land Community (Svay Rieng)
45. M'Lop Tapang
46. Mother Nature Cambodia (MNC)
47. Ou Damdaek Community (Kampong Thom)
48. Ou Vor Preng Community (Battambang)
49. Peace Bridges Organization (PBO)
50. Peam Ros Community (Kampong Speu)
51. People Center for Development and Peace (PDP-Center)
52. Phum Sela Khmer Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)
53. Phum Phsar Kandal Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)
54. Phnom Krom Community (Siemreap)
55. Ponlok Khmer (PKH)
56. Prey Peay Fishery Community (Kampot)
57. Prey Chher Pech Changvar Laor Chhert Community (Kampong Chhnang)
58. Rattanak Rokha Forestry Community (Oddar Meanchey)

59. Reaksmei Sameakki Community (Kampong Speu)
60. Rural Cambodia Technological Support Organisation (RCTSO)
61. Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT)
62. Samaki Chek Meas Community (Svay Rieng)
63. Samaki Romeas Haek Community (Svay Rieng)
64. Siem Reap Airport H.C.C Company Tourism Employees Union
65. Sofitel Phokeethra Hotel Independent Solidarity Union
66. Sre Prang Community (Tboung Khmum)
67. Ta Ni Land Community (Siemreap)
68. The Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW (NGO-CEDAW)
69. Trapeang Chour Community (Kampong Speu)
70. Transparency International Cambodia (TI)
71. Tourism Employees Union of Les Jardin Du Bassac
72. Tourism Employees Union of Cintri (Cambodia)
73. Tourism Employees Union of GSI
74. Youth Resources Development Program (YRDP)
75. Building and Wood Workers Trade Union Federation of Cambodia (BWTUC)