



CALD Statement No. 3, S. 2020

CALD strongly condemns the arrest and detention of Cambodian opposition members amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

CALD is outraged by the Hun Sen government's continued suppression of the members of the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), the main opposition party in Cambodia and CALD full member, amidst the global health pandemic.

At a time when the world is coming together to combat an invisible enemy in the form of the COVID-19 virus, the Cambodian government continues to fight the wrong enemy by arbitrarily arresting a total of eleven CNRP members since March 2020, and putting them in pre-trial detention in the notorious Prey Sar prison in Phnom Penh.

The arrests, which took place in various provinces all over the country, were done on allegations of “plotting”, “inciting serious chaos to social security”, and “inciting military personnel to disobedience.”

The CNRP officials and activists arrested include:

- Mr. Khut Chroek, CNRP Executive Committee member arrested in Prey Veng province on 10 March;
- Mr. Ngin Khean, CNRP Youth Movement member arrested in Prey Veng province on 17 March;
- Mr. Long Phary, head of CNRP Executive Committee arrested in Prey Veng province on 18 March;
- Mr. Hin Chharn, CNRP district councilor in Romeas Haek district arrested in Svay Rieng province on 20 March;
- Mr. Thay Kunthea, CNRP activist arrested in Kampong Chhnang province on 26 March;
- Mr. Keo Thay, head of CNRP Executive Committee and a leader of the Cambodia Independent Teacher's Association arrested in Kampong Chhnang on 26 March;
- Mr. Yim Sareth, deputy head of CNRP Executive Committee and former deputy commune chief in Chantrei arrested in Svay Rieng province on 27 March;
- Mr. Khim Pheana, head of CNRP Executive Committee in Phnom Penh's Sankat Phsar Depo III and former commune chief arrested in Kandal province on 2 April;
- Mr. Chum Chan, secretary of CNRP Executive Committee and former elected provincial council member arrested in Prey Veng province on 13 April;
- Mr. Nhaem Vean, CNRP Executive Committee member arrested in Svay Rieng province on 15 April; and
- Mr. Sok Chantha, CNRP Executive Committee member arrested in Prey Veng Province on 20 April.

“Most arrests were undertaken without warrants and in violation of due process”, said Mu Sochua, CNRP Vice President and former CALD Women's Caucus Chairperson. She added that families of those arrested do not know their whereabouts, and that the lawyers are struggling to access their case documents. She also expressed deep concerns that those arrested are now detained in an overcrowded Cambodian prison, whose poor and unhygienic condition makes it prone to a disease outbreak.

This series of arrests reflects the kind of government Cambodia currently has - an authoritarian regime concerned with further tightening its grip to power by silencing dissent. Worse, it is even using the current pandemic challenges to further entrench itself and destroy whatever remains of the political opposition.

For one, the Cambodian government pushed for the passage of a state of emergency law, unanimously approved by the National Assembly last 7 April 2020, which appears to provide unlimited powers to the government in dealing with the pandemic. However, as Mu Sochua observed: "The law will just provide a legal cover to Hun Sen to have an even tighter grip on the freedoms and liberties enshrined in the constitution." The most critical of which is the threat to freedom of speech and expression, as the opposition and human rights defenders risk arrest and detention when they speak out against abuses of power committed in the guise of responding to the health crisis.

In this regard, the members of CALD are united in making the following calls to the Cambodian government:

Stop Attacking the Political Opposition

CALD condemns in strongest terms the arrest and detention of CNRP members and activists as they are clearly politically motivated. Moreover, the authorities appeared to have violated both procedural and substantive due process in making the arrests. Hence, the Cambodian government must immediately release the concerned CNRP members and activists, drop the charges against them, and cease from committing further actions that threaten, harass and persecute the political opposition.

Do Not Use State of Emergency Law for Political Ends

As there is a certainty that the State of Emergency Law will be cleared by the Constitutional Council for implementation, the Cambodian government must ensure that the law will be used in the interest of public health and not as an instrument of political persecution. The Cambodian people and the international community must also closely monitor the implementation of this law to prevent its abuse for political ends.

Protect the Cambodian People from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Instead of attacking the opposition and sowing further political divide, the Hun Sen government must focus its efforts on uplifting the state of health and well-being of the Cambodian people. It must divert its energy and resources to provide quality health care and food security during this time of global uncertainty. Moreover, it must adopt necessary measures to cushion the economic impact of the crisis, particularly on the most vulnerable economic sectors — migrant workers, factory workers, and those in the informal economy — majority of which are women.

The Cambodian people deserve efficient and effective public service and governance to spark hope and unity in the country especially during these trying times. Arresting opposition members and putting them behind bars on trumped-up charges certainly does not contribute in creating a conducive environment that allows the country to effectively address the pandemic.

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