



### **CALD Statement No. 8, S. 2020**

The Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD) condemns the July 31 arrest and continuing detention of union leader, Mr. Rong Chhun, as a manifestation of Cambodia's continuing weaponization of the law against human rights activists and government critics. Mr. Chhun was arrested on charges of "incitement to commit felony or cause social unrest" under Article 495 of the country's Penal Code. This was in relation to a July 21 statement he issued on behalf of Cambodian Confederation of Unions where he emphasized the irregularities in the placement of border posts in Ponhea Kraek district, Tbong Khmum province, which apparently led to the loss of a portion of ancestral lands belonging to Cambodian farmers.

It must be noted that Mr. Chhun, a former member of Cambodia's National Election Committee and former president of the Cambodia's Teachers' Association, made the statement after visiting the Trapeang Phlong commune in the above-mentioned province and conferring with the farmers in the area, who claimed that they lost around 500 meters (1640 feet) of their land to the border. For the Cambodian government, through the Cambodian Border Committee, to immediately label Mr. Chhun's statement as "fake news" based on "groundless accusations" completely ignores the views of the Cambodian farmers in the area and in other parts of the country, who, through the years, have been complaining about violations of right to ancestral domain, land grabs, and forced evictions.

In the past, the Cambodian government blatantly used the border issues with Vietnam to clampdown on the opposition. In 2011, that the country's Supreme Court found Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) leader, Mr. Sam Rainsy, guilty earlier of racial discrimination and destruction of property on disputed charges relating to the uprooting of border markings near Vietnam in 2009. This ruling was cited by the government to remove his parliamentary immunity, and eventually, to strip him of his parliamentary seat. In 2015, the government threatened the then exiled Mr. Rainsy that he could be arrested for a Facebook post on a supposed 1979 Cambodia-Vietnam border treaty, which already led to the imprisonment of then CNRP Senator Hong Sok Hour, who was arrested despite his parliamentary immunity.

The recent arrest of Mr. Rong Chhun, who had also recently led workers' protests demanding severance package for loss of employment due to COVID19, shows that the Cambodian government continues with the weaponization of the law against members of civil society and the political opposition. Through the years, community activists defending the right to housing and protesting against land grabs and forced evictions have faced fabricated charges and jail terms. Trade union leaders have been detained or worse, subjected to extra-judicial killings. Journalists who criticize the government have

endured trumped-up charges, lengthy trials, imprisonment and violence. Recently, at the height of the pandemic, more than a dozen activists and supporters of the CNRP have been arrested and detained in pre-trial detention at Prey Sar prison on dubious charges. Mr. Chhun is just the latest in this long line of human rights activists, journalists, labor leaders, opposition members and government critics who have been silenced by the Hun Sen government.

CALD calls on the Cambodian government to immediately and unconditionally release Mr. Ron Chhun and all prisoners of conscience. It must also cease from committing further actions that threaten, harass and persecute civil society leaders, members of the media, and the political opposition. Furthermore, we implore the Hun Sen government, through the Cambodian Border Committee and other state agencies, to conduct a thorough, fair and independent investigation of the claims of the farmers with regard to border posts, and to immediately redress their grievances if their claims are proven correct.

CALD also appeals to the international community to strongly urge the Hun Sen government to always respect freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and other fundamental human rights, as guaranteed by the country's constitution and the international human rights instruments where Cambodia is a state-party to. It is the moral obligation of the international community not to let Cambodian people, who have already suffered enough during the Khmer Rouge regime, to endure further abuses in the hands of another autocrat.



**Senator Francis "Kiko" Pangilinan**  
Chairperson

4 August 2020