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Cambodia: Independent human rights NGO threatened with closure

Cambodia's courageous and outspoken civil society has taken another serious hit as Prime Minister Hun Sen threatened the closure of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR), a prominent local human rights organization, on 26 November. Threats of closure of an association aimed at silencing yet another independent, peaceful voice dedicated to defending human rights will have a chilling effect on the exercise of human rights.

The Prime Minister called for the closure of CCHR and ordered the Ministry of Interior to investigate the organization. Hun Sen also advanced spurious allegations that CCHR had been "created by and under concealed influence of foreigners" and linked CCHR to a purported "colour revolution" aimed at overthrowing the current regime with foreign assistance.

Since the lead up to the commune elections in June 2017, the Cambodian Government has carried out a widespread and relentless onslaught against civil society, critical media and the political opposition, silencing one independent voice after another. CCHR is the latest victim of a series of bans, forced closures, suspensions and false allegations against international and local NGOs as well as media outlets.

Amnesty International is calling for meaningful interventions from the international community to end this rapid downward spiral, and to publicly articulate its strong support for civil society during this critical time.

Beyond advancing vague, unfounded allegations, neither Hun Sen nor other government officials have provided a legal justification for investigating CCHR. Amnesty International is concerned that the undefined and vague concept of "political neutrality" laid down in Article 24 of Cambodia's controversial Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO) will be used against CCHR, as it has been against other organizations. This provision has already on several occasions served as a basis for decisions by the Ministry of Interior to prevent the registration or order the closure of NGOs and other associations. Hun Sen's calls for CCHR's closure infers – as in previous instances – that the organization's guilt under this oppressive legislation has already been decided in violation of CCHR's right to due process under international law. Due process is an essential safeguard protecting individuals and entities from the arbitrary exercise of government power.

Amnesty International believes there are no grounds for either the threats against CCHR or any investigations against it, but at any rate CCHR has the right to be heard and represented properly during any investigation, presented with its findings and be able to challenge them in front of an independent body. Cambodia is a party to several human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which, as reflected in its Constitution, protects not only the human rights to freedom of association and expression as well as the right to due process.

Amnesty International urges the Cambodian authorities to stop punishing civil society organizations for their peaceful human rights work and to take steps to ensure they are protected from all forms of harassment, obstruction and retaliation. The work of human rights NGOs provides a service to the Cambodian people and should not be politicized.

Background

CCHR was founded by Kem Sokha in 2002. Kem Sokha left the organization in 2007 to resume his political activities. Since then steps have been taken to ensure that CCHR's mandate and mission continue to be based on principles of independence and non-partisanship. CCHR has received global

recognition for its contributions to the protection and promotion of human rights in Cambodia and advocacy for justice for victims of serious human rights violations.

Among its many campaigns, CCHR has called for the release of peaceful activists which Amnesty International has considered prisoners of conscience including human rights defender Tep Vanny, currently serving a two-and-a-half year sentence for a peaceful housing rights protest in 2013, and for the dropping of trumped up charges against four current staffers and one former staffer of well-known Cambodian local NGO, the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), who were released on bail in July after spending 427 days in pre-trial detention. They are currently awaiting the start of a trial, which has not yet been scheduled.

The allegations against CCHR follow a Supreme Court ruling on 16 November that dissolved the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), formerly led by Kem Sokha, who remains in prison after his arrest three months ago on charges of “conspiracy with a foreign power”. The Supreme Court also banned 118 CNRP officials from any political activity for five years, in a blatant act of political repression and a serious violation of the human rights to freedom of association and expression. Amnesty International has called for Kem Sokha’s immediate and unconditional release.

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