

## **Cambodia: Stop using courts to persecute people who stand up for human rights – UN experts**

GENEVA (01 November 2021) – UN experts\* today sharply criticized Cambodia for “weaponising” its court system to methodically reduce the scope for citizen action and called on the country to protect freedom of expression after convictions of 15 human rights defenders and political activists in two separate cases.

“We are extremely troubled by the verdicts, which again reaffirm the methodical and systematic erosion of civic and political space in Cambodia,” they said. “We are truly alarmed that the courts are again being weaponised to silence any form of dissent, including peaceful activism that is protected under the right to freedom of expression.”

The experts spoke out after seven human rights defenders affiliated with Khmer Thavrak and the Khmer Student Intelligent League Association – who campaign for human rights, environmental protection and social justice – were sentenced to 20-month prison terms and fined US\$500 each for incitement to commit a felony or cause social chaos on 26 October. Seven members of the disbanded Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) were also convicted in the same case, including four who were tried *in absentia*.

At the time of their conviction, there were 25 human rights defenders in prison in Cambodia, the highest number in two years.

The human rights defenders – Ms. Chhoeun Daravy, Mr. Hun Vannak, Mr. Koet Saray, Mr. Tha Lavy, Ms. Eng Malai, Mr. Muong Sopheak, and Mr. Mean Prommony – were arrested in separate incidents in August and September last year. Eng Malai was arrested after leaving the UN Human Rights Office in Cambodia.

They were detained for 13 months while awaiting trial in breach of Cambodia’s domestic laws and international standards. The experts condemned the denial of bail to these human rights defenders.

In a separate case, on 1 November, [a 16-year-old boy](#) was convicted on charges of incitement and insulting public officials and sentenced to eight months in prison, with an additional two years under judicial supervision. Having served four and a half months in pre-trial detention, the remainder of his sentence has been suspended and he should shortly be released. The boy’s father is a jailed CNRP activist and his mother is an

active member of the Friday Women, a group of family members of jailed CNRP activists who hold weekly demonstrations calling for the release of their loved ones.

Commenting on the boy's conviction, the UN experts said, "the conviction of a minor with an autism spectrum disorder, is a shameful nadir in the authorities' continuing campaign of intimidation and violence against civil society and opposition activists and affiliates. We see the conviction and the conditions imposed on his liberty as a very transparent attempt by the authorities to prevent his mother from demonstrating for the release of her husband".

Over the past two years, UN human rights experts have repeatedly written to the Minister of Foreign Affairs to raise concerns about the criminalization of human rights work.

Cases included the convictions of prominent trade union leader Mr. Rong Chhun and two of his supporters, Ms. Sar Kanika and Mr. Tun Nimol, in August 2021 as well and three environmental human rights defenders, Ms. Long Kunthea, Ms. Phuong Keoraksmeay, and Mr. Thun Ratha, in May 2021. The experts also objected to acts of violence against peaceful protesters in November 2020.

On 11 October, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on Cambodia expressing serious concern at the deterioration of the civil and political environment due to sustained judicial prosecution.

"As stressed in the resolution, Cambodia should take immediate action to nurture a vibrant civil society and a healthy democratic system, and to protect and ensure freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly," the experts said. "We can think of no more disturbing way for the country to mark 30 years since the Cambodia Peace Accords than with these new convictions of peaceful activists."

The UN experts called on the Government to take immediate steps to safeguard Cambodia's civic and democratic space by implementing recommendations they accepted at the 2019 Universal Periodic Review. Among these were a pledge to create conditions where "civil society, including human rights defenders, can freely carry out their work without interference or hindrance".

ENDS

**\* The experts: Mr. Vitit Muntarbhorn, [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia](#); Ms. Irene Khan, [Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#); and Ms. Mary Lawlor, [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#).**

*Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent*

*experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures' experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.*

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