

Cambodia: UN expert concerned at escalating tensions and crackdown

GENEVA (8 November 2019) – The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia has expressed grave concerns about the heightened political crackdown across the country, calling on the Government to respect the rights to freedom of opinion, expression and assembly.

Since August, Rhona Smith said she had received credible information that at least 89 individuals have been charged with ‘plotting against the State’ and at least 52 people have been arrested in 20 provinces. This brings to over 200 the number of cases of harassment, and judicial actions against CNRP members or supporters since 1 January 2019.

Sam Rainsy, the former leader of the outlawed opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), has stated he will return from self-imposed exile on 9 November. The Prime Minister announced Rainsy would be arrested on arrival in Cambodia as he has been convicted in absentia and sentenced to jail.

“The rapid increase in numbers of arrests and serious charges filed against CNRP members is alarming,” said Smith, an independent expert appointed by the Human Rights Council. “Arrests based on exercising the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, through political discourse and commenting on public affairs are not permitted. Cambodia must respect its international obligations.”

Civil society organisations have also reported increased surveillance and monitoring by local authorities, as well as limitations to their activities. “Civil society organisations should be able to work freely in Cambodia,” Smith said.

There have also been reports of a significant increase in the deployment of armed forces, including police and gendarmes, assembled at border checkpoints and various villages, with military vehicles and personnel armed with weapons. “I urge law enforcement officials to apply non-violent means before resorting to any use of force and firearms and I call on all people to act peacefully and with restraint in words and actions,” Smith said.

“Saturday is Cambodia’s Independence Day, marking decolonisation of the country. It is also the eve of Bon Om Touk, the Water Festival, marking the end of the rainy season. Both of these events are celebrated with public holidays and many people travelling to Phnom Penh.” The independent expert notes that whilst there may be heightened security around this time, “everyone has the right to safely enjoy these peaceful cultural celebrations free from fear”.

Smith also expressed concerns about the recent detention in nearby countries of some CNRP members attempting to travel to Cambodia, and she urged States to encourage dialogue to resolve differences peacefully and respect freedom of movement.

“I call on the Government and all parties to reduce escalations in tensions and seek dialogue in a peaceful environment that allows for diverging political voices to be expressed, and to avoid any further restrictions on fundamental freedoms that are necessary for the enjoyment of human rights by all,” she said.

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Professor Rhona Smith (United Kingdom) was appointed as [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia](#) by the UN Human Rights Council in March 2015.

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