



Cambodia Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: observation and monitoring
of demonstrations in Phnom Penh, August – September 1998.
Phnom Penh, September 14 1998

Since the beginning of the large-scale demonstrations and sit-ins outside the National Assembly and the Ministry of Information several weeks ago, the Cambodia Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has deployed teams to observe and monitor these events.

The purpose of this observation and monitoring is:

- to observe whether people's rights of free assembly and freedom of expression being upheld
- to help ensure that all demonstrations are peaceful and to help prevent violence from any quarter
- to intervene in certain cases to protect individuals whose human rights are being violated, for example by arbitrary arrest, beating or, at worst, killing.

Where necessary, the teams contact the authorities to draw their attention to particular situations where the risk of violence is acute. Teams have intervened directly in various ways, including carrying wounded people to hospital and, on a number of occasions, assisting monks to return to their pagodas or to other places of safety from demonstration sites or public places where their safety could not be guaranteed. Depending on the particular circumstances, between two and eight teams have been deployed at any one time. While usually only two or three were required to monitor the static sit-ins, more have been required to track the various mobile demonstrations which have been on the streets since Tuesday September 8. In several instances, where there was a possibility of a confrontation between different groups of demonstrators or between demonstrators and the security forces, teams have positioned themselves ahead of the demonstrators and have attempted to mediate to reduce the risk of violence. This mediation has been successful on several occasions. Under no circumstances have teams ever "led" demonstrations of any kind, although they may have physically preceded them at a distance to be able to observe events.

On Thursday September 10, two groups of demonstrators came to the COHCHR. The first group consisted of between 50 – 100 people and the second of about 500 people. In each case, Office staff invited the demonstrators to nominate representatives, and a delegation of five persons was received inside the Office by the Director and colleagues. All other demonstrators remained outside the gates of the Office.

The Director invited the representatives to state their complaints and demands. These were mainly broad-based:

- that the authorities refrain from violence in dealing with demonstrators
- that the demonstrators' right to peaceful assembly be protected
- that the bodies of those killed be released to their families for burial
- that the international community support Cambodia's search for justice and democracy

The Director and colleagues explained the role of the Office and referred to statements which had been made in recent days, calling for peaceful demonstrations to be allowed to proceed, and requiring all those involved, whether the authorities or the demonstrators, to refrain from violence or incitement to violence, especially of a racist nature. The demonstrators were told that, while their right to demonstrate peacefully was respected by the Office, the Office could not in any manner guarantee their safety. They were advised that the location of the Office (in a narrow street which could easily be blocked at either end) placed the demonstrators in danger in the event of violence against them of any kind. They were therefore advised to disperse.

The first group dispersed after a few minutes. The second group of demonstrators seemed unwilling to disperse and eventually Office staff accompanied them out of the street where the Office is located to prevent a major obstruction being created. To encourage them to move out of the congested area, several Office vehicles accompanied them towards Monivong Boulevard, turning off into side streets after a few hundred yards. Teams in Office vehicles continued to follow the demonstrations which took place at various sites throughout the day.

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