

## Cambodia: Halt harassment of free media and civil society organisations

(Bangkok, 24 August 2017) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) condemns recent attacks by the Cambodian Government against civil society organisations and free media in the country. These repressive measures come at a critical juncture for Cambodia, and severely compromise the legitimacy and fairness of next year's election.

On 19 August 2017, the Cambodia Daily was imposed a tax bill of 6.3 million USD. The tax-officers warned that failure to pay the amount by 4 September 2017 would result in foreclosure of the offices and seizure of all assets. According to the general manager of the newspaper, Douglas Steele, the tax bill is not based on any audit of the paper's finances.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, two US government funded radio broadcasters, Radio Free Asia (RFA) and Voice of America (VOA), were sent a letter, signed by the Finance Minister, Aun Porn Moniroth, alleging that they did not have correct media licenses to operate and were not yet registered with the tax office in Cambodia.

It is important to note that all three media outlets have been critical of government policies and the leadership of Prime Minister Hun Sen. In February, the Cambodia Daily reported on a paper written by Lee Morgenbesser,<sup>2</sup> which alleged that Hun Sen's rule was a 'personalist dictatorship'.

Similarly, last week, it published an article about an investigation, which revealed that senior staff members of Cambodia's largest human rights organisations were suffering 'intensifying levels of harassment, surveillance, intimidation and threats' before the general election.<sup>3</sup>

Prime Minister Hun Sen also criticised reports by the civil society election monitoring coalition, the 'Situation Room' that the recent commune elections were not free and fair. The coalition is made up of election monitor groups, including the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL) and the Neutral and Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (NICFEC), as well as human rights organisations like the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) and the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR). He also pledged to disallow them to monitor elections next year, blaming them for not having registered as non-governmental organisations and undermining the legitimacy of the Government.

On 23 August 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ordered the closure of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), an international development and democracy organisation, with its foreign staff given seven days to leave the country. The order was given under the Law on Associations and Non-governmental Organisations (LANGO), which imposes draconian restrictions on the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, association, expression and opinion. All these rights are guaranteed

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/tax-head-threatens-daily-with-september-4-closure-133851/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/featured/hun-sens-dictatorship-has-transcended-cpp-researcher-says-125747/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/rights-groups-raise-alarm-threats-surveillance-133652/>

under the Constitution of Cambodia and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Cambodia is a party.

FORUM-ASIA urges the Government of Cambodia to stop harassing independent media outlets and civil society organisations. It also urges the Government to abide fully by its national and international human rights obligations, cooperate with the Special Mandate Holder on the Situation of Human Rights in Cambodia, Rhona Smith, and engage with the upcoming 36<sup>th</sup> Human Rights Council session which will discuss the resolution on the human rights situation in Cambodia.

**About FORUM-ASIA:**

*FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.*

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