

[Statement] Cambodia: Release detained activists, uphold freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression

BANGKOK, Thailand (22 August 2024) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is deeply concerned over the arrests of more than 70 activists, protesters, and members of the opposition Candlelight Party ahead of a planned rally against the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Areas (CLV-DTA) agreement.

Such a crackdown on peaceful protests violates people's freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression.

Launched in 2004, the CLV-DTA agreement is an economic cooperation deal between Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. It aims to enhance socio-economic development, connectivity, and infrastructure in the region. However, activists are [concerned](#) that under the agreement, agricultural land concessions to Vietnamese or Lao investors could result in the loss of Cambodian territory and natural resources.

A series of arrests

It was reported that protesters planned to organise a rally on 18 August 2024 in front of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, demanding the government to withdraw from the CLV-DTA agreement.

Police then established barricades on major roads leading to the capital, setting up roadblocks near the Royal Palace. Over 1,000 officers were prepared to intervene in the event of protest, according to [Phnom Penh Police Chief](#) Chuon Narin. Justice Minister Koeut Rith [warned](#) that protesters could be charged with treason and may face prison sentences of 15 to 30 years.

On 18 August, four members of the Khmer Student Intelligent League Association were [arrested for unknown reasons](#). Their office was shut down by police on the orders of the Phnom Penh Municipal Court. For allegedly mobilising people for the planned protest, 31 others were also [arrested](#).

On 17 August, a day before the alleged planned rally, at least 20 activists were [arrested](#). Among the arrested were 16 youths who planned to attend a youth forum on social protection. The said forum was cancelled; meanwhile, the youths were summoned for questioning by the authorities. They were then [released](#) the next day.

Three members of the opposition Candlelight Party—Sun Piseth, Lor Thorn, and Meas Kol—were also arrested for unknown reasons.

On 16 August, Sem Sophal, a Grassroots Democratic Party activist was also arrested for unknown reasons, prompting the party to [issue](#) a statement demanding his release. Around 14 others were [arrested](#) for allegedly inciting people to revolt against the government.

On 15 August, a provincial court charged Candlelight Party member Sok Chea with [plotting](#) incitement by allegedly posting an online message to not support the CLV-DTA agreement.

On 23 July, activists Srun Srorn, Peng Sophea, and San Sith were [arrested](#) following the publication of their video on Facebook, conveying the CLV-DTA agreement's potential negative impacts. Their arrest order came directly from former Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Call to action

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Cambodian Government to immediately and unconditionally release all detained human rights activists, protesters, and other voices of dissents.

Rather than silencing dissent, Cambodian authorities should facilitate, respect, and address people's demands expressed through peaceful protests.

We also call on the international community to closely monitor the situation and to support efforts to protect human rights and democratic freedoms in Cambodia.

"The mass arrests of activists, students, and youth stifle people's right to engage in public discourse and peaceful protests. The arbitrary detention of protestors or those expressing their political views infringes on people's freedom of expression," said Mary Aileen Diez-Bacalso, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

"These actions violate international human rights standards and democratic principles, contributing to the erosion of Cambodia's civic space," Bacalso added.

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About FORUM-ASIA:

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 85 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

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