Mr. Keut Saray
Director of the Khmer Student Intelligent League Association

Mr. Keut Saray, 31 years old, was born in Soutr Nikum District, Siem Reap Province. In 2002, he was ordained as a monk and left his hometown to live at Khnay Romeas pagoda to pursue his studies. In 2018, he passed the Pali Sanskrit High School exam in Battambang province, after which he began studying law at Preah Sihanouk Reach University. While attending university, he engaged in natural resources and human rights protection activities by joining various youth groups. He was eventually forced to defrock in September 2020 after being charged with incitement.

Outraged by the suffering of victims of human rights abuses, social injustice, and the impact of the loss of natural resources, Mr. Saray became involved in 2018 with the Mother Nature Movement. There, he participated in campaigns advocating for sustainable development without human rights violations. In early 2020, Mr. Saray and other social activists established the Khmer Thavrak Youth Group to call for the respect and promotion of human rights and social justice. The former monk was able to engage in social work due to the encouragement from teachers and friends and was motivated largely by the historical factors that led to division among Cambodians.

Mr. Saray is currently the Director of the Khmer Student Intelligent League Association ("KSILA"), which aims to encourage Cambodian students to serve the interests of society and the development of the nation through education, capacity building, and the promotion of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and the protection of the environment and natural resources. Before becoming president of KSILA, he was arrested by the Phnom Penh authorities along with other activists on 6 September 2020 for planning a peaceful demonstration in Freedom Park to demand social justice. They forced him to defrock and charged him with incitement to cause social unrest. Six other members of the Khmer Thavrak Youth Group and KSILA, who were arrested at different times, were also sent to pre-trial detention.

After months in prison, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court heard Mr. Saray’s case on 27 July and 31 August 2021. On 26 October 2021, the Court sentenced him and the other activists to 20 months in prison, but suspended their sentences for five to six months. Mr. Saray was eventually released on 5 November 2021, but the proceedings against him continue. On 22 August 2022, the Phnom Penh Appeal Court upheld the first instance verdict, and the case is currently awaiting trial at the Supreme Court. In addition to facing charges and imprisonment, the former monk has also been subjected to insults from authorities due to his fight for social justice. His family also faced threats.

For Mr. Saray, human rights activists advocating for people who have lost their land and homes can face risks, such as loss of life and imprisonment. Despite these challenges, he said that, as a Cambodian citizen, he would not relinquish his responsibility to participate in defending human rights. Mr. Saray also encouraged human rights defenders to be brave and strive to change society for the better: “In natural law, good deeds always overcome evil.”

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