

Peaceful Protest Turned Away From Freedom Park

By [Mech Dara](#) | January 21, 2015, The Cambodia Daily

Some 50 Daun Penh district security guards and about as many riot police prevented 100 anti-eviction protesters from gathering at Phnom Penh's Freedom Park on Tuesday after the city deemed the gathering illegal.

The protesters were from a number of eviction-hit communities, including the Boeng Kak and Borei Keila neighborhoods of Phnom Penh and communities in Preah Vihear province.



Riot police gather near a protester sitting on the edge of Phnom Penh's Freedom Park on Tuesday after security forces blocked some 100 demonstrators from entering the park. (John Vink)

The group wants the government to settle their myriad land disputes in their favor and to release 10 jailed activists, nine from Boeng Kak and one from Borei Keila.

The protesters began marching from the U.S. Embassy in Daun Penh district at 9:30 a.m. But as the group approached Freedom Park, district security guards and riot police armed with shields and batons used barricades to block off Street 51 in front of the park and deny access.

The group moved to an adjacent park and protested until about 3:30 p.m. before dispersing.

Contacted later in the day, Phnom Penh deputy governor Khuong Sreng said City Hall decided to deny the protesters access to Freedom Park because they had disturbed the peace on previous occasions.

“What they do, it is beyond democracy because it will cause anarchy,” Mr. Sreng said. “It is illegal and they don’t have a monopoly on freedom.”

He added that the protesters were also blocked because some communities represented in the group were not cooperating with City Hall.

“City Hall is working to solve the Boeng Kak and Borei Keila issues,” Mr. Sreng said.

“But they do not come to solve the problem and they keep protesting, so City Hall did not allow them to do it.”

The deputy governor said the group’s demand to release the 10 activists was unreasonable.

“They asked the court to release the prisoners, but it is not their right.... It is the right of the court,” he said.

Mr. Sreng said plans for a monthlong protest, which the group informed City Hall of earlier this week, were not fair to other demonstrators who might want to use the park.

“In the demonstration law, it does not state whether they can hold [a protest] for a month,” he said. “We are the authority and we have set [a time limit] because they are not the only ones who want to express their views.”

The Law on Peaceful Assembly states that demonstrations held at any of the country’s so-called freedom parks can only be held between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. It does not place a limit on how many consecutive days a demonstration may run.

Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, said in an email Tuesday that not allowing a demonstration at Freedom Park defeated the point of the law.

“Restricting a peaceful demonstration on the basis of its duration clearly conflicts also with the purpose of this law, which is to ensure the freedom of expression of citizens through the exercise of freedom of assembly,” Ms. Sopheap said.

“What happened today at Freedom Park was simply an unjustified limitation to the exercise of fundamental rights that had no legal ground,” she added.

Yorm Bopha, an anti-eviction activist from Boeng Kak, said her group chose the relatively secluded Freedom Park for the demonstration precisely so that they would not impose on other residents.

“Since we do not want to march on the street and do not want authorities to accuse us of affecting public order, we came to protest at Freedom Park,” Ms. Bopha told security guards.

“If you do not allow us to demonstrate in Freedom Park, where will you allow us to do it?”

Am Sam Ath, technical supervisor for rights group Licadho, said the city probably blocked access to the park because political tensions between the ruling CPP and opposition CNRP were once again on the rise.

“Freedom Park is a place for gathering and expressing views in a peaceful way,” he said. “But in our country, the government begins to restrict people’s freedoms and rights when politics gets tense.”

On Monday, Prime Minister Hun Sen warned the CNRP that seven of its lawmakers facing incitement and insurrection charges over a protest in July to open Freedom Park that turned violent could still face jail despite their parliamentary immunity.

(Additional reporting by Chris Mueller)

dara@cambodiadaily.com

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