Coronavirus: Cambodia refuses to evacuate citizens from China as ‘we need to share their happiness and pain’

Don’t run away from the Chinese people during this difficult moment

Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen has said the government will not evacuate nationals in China amid the coronavirus outbreak, so as not to “strain relations”.

The decision to leave Cambodian citizens in China was described by the prime minister as “soft diplomacy” during a press conference on Thursday.

Hun Sen also used the press conference to chastise reporters who wore masks to the event, threatening to remove them, and also criticised Cambodians for wanting to leave China.

He said: “We decided not to evacuate Cambodian students. Evacuating them would probably bring an end to opportunities for Cambodians to study there. China would stop offering scholarships.

“We are keeping them there to share [Chinese people’s] happiness and pain and to help them solve this situation.

“Don’t run away from the Chinese people during this difficult moment,” he added. “Loving each other during the time of adversity, being good friends during these difficult circumstances. This is the slogan of Cambodia since our ancestral times.”

Cambodia considers China a valuable diplomatic relationship due to the amount of economic investments and aid the Southeast Asian country receives from the latter.

According to the Phnom Penh Post, the prime minister also said cancelling flights to and from China was out of the question as it would “kill the hospitality and service industry in Cambodia”.
“Cancelling flights with China would not be an attack on China. It would be an attack on the Cambodian economy,” he said.

“It would strain relations between the countries. I don’t care what other countries think – Cambodia does not behave this way.”

The announcement has drawn criticism by human rights groups and opposing political parties in the country.

Phil Robertson, Deputy Asia Director of Human Rights Watch, told the Independent: “PM Hun Sen can deflect blame all he wants, but why is he prioritising good relations between Cambodia and China rather than taking preventive steps to prevent the spread of the Wuhan coronavirus among the Cambodian people?”
"Cambodia hardly seems prepared if there is a wider outbreak of this flu. Cambodia should prioritise greater transparency in preparing the country to respond, including by actively encouraging the involvement of community and civil society leaders in formulating the response to this crisis.

“But so far, it’s all been lectures and PM Hun Sen wanting to show bravado by not wearing a face mask,” Mr Robertson added. “This is authoritarianism, pure and simple – and it’s the Cambodian people who will suffer for it.”

Sopheap Chak, executive director at the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), said in a statement: “The wellbeing of citizens should be the priority, and ought not to be compromised in favour of diplomatic and economic relations.
“The government is responsible for these individuals and should ensure the safety of all Cambodian citizens, regardless of where they are in the world.”

Mu Sochua, exiled deputy leader of the opposing Cambodia National Rescue Party, told the Independent “Hun Sen is kowtowing to China - [his] friend for life. His concern is how to keep his power more than the health of his own citizens and anyone inside Cambodia. He bullied a young female reporter for asking him questions about the competence of the Ministry of Health in handling this deadly virus.

"The lives of Cambodian students in Wuhan are far less important [to Hun Sen] than kowtowing to China. Hun Sen should be [held] responsible to the global community for taking no action."

There has been one confirmed diagnosis of coronavirus in Cambodia, from a man who travelled to the country from the Chinese city of Wuhan, which is ground zero for the virus.

Speaking after that confirmation, Cambodia’s Minister of Health, Mam Bun Heng, said on Wednesday that the virus could not spread in Cambodia because the “country is just too hot”.

He was quoted by the Phnom Penh Post as saying: “Infections are unlikely here because our country is just too hot. Only one case has been reported so far in [Cambodia], so people that are not living in areas where the virus has been reported don’t need to wear a mask.”

The outbreak has infected 11,791 people in China alone and the death toll rose to 259 on Saturday.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a global emergency on Thursday, which “flipped the switch” from a cautious attitude earlier to recommending governments prepare for the possibility of the virus spreading much more rapidly.
The WHO said it was especially concerned about some cases abroad that may involve human-to-human transmission, contrary to what Cambodia’s health minister has said.

China suspended plane, bus and train links to Wuhan on 23 January in an effort to contain the disease, with lockdowns taking place in surrounding cities as well.

Details: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/coronavirus-cambodia-china-evacuation-hun-sen-a9312616.html?fbclid=IwAR1TLj1mlcvo7hCKwgAUj_CPHesHEB3_hOJVPGFJU4_ujEjzLJ8_LoXsOeE