UN Human Rights Chief Says Violations In Cambodia Unrelenting

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FILE: Civil Society groups, unionists, activists, and Cambodian citizens joined the celebration of the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in Phnom Penh, in Phnom Penh, on December 10, 2018. (Aun Chhengpor/ VOA Khmer)

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PHNOM PENH —

UN Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet said her office has continued to receive reports of persistent violations of political and civil rights in Cambodia, affecting the political opposition and average Cambodians alike.

The commissioner was speaking at the Human Rights Council session in Geneva last week, when she said the intimidation of civil society groups in Cambodia, arbitrary detention of political opponents and silencing of critics had continued unabated.
“I call on the Government to respect its commitment to uphold all the human rights of its people – including freedom of the media, the impartial rule of law, and the right to freely participate in public affairs without fear of persecution,” Bachelet said in her oral statement.

The European Union partially suspended trade privileges last month after a year-long monitoring and investigation process that found serious and systemic human rights violations in Cambodia, with the economic bloc highlighting that there had been little improvement since initiation of the withdrawal procedure in late 2018.

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Kem Sokha is still being tried on treason charges, more former CNRP members have been charged on widely-condemned as baseless charges, and civil society groups continue to be blocked from performing their activities.
Chak Sopheap, head of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, said the deterioration of the rights situation began after the contentious 2013 general elections, which witnessed mass anti-government demonstrations, and has only worsened since.

“It is the state’s duty to ensure and protect more human rights,” Chak Sopheap said.

Similarly, Am Sam Ath, a senior investigator for rights group Licadho, said that both the UN and the EU have recently urged the Cambodian government to respect democratic principles and human rights.

“The government can improve the respect for human rights and democracy in Cambodia if there is a will in view of the national interests and people interests, but not political interests,” he said.

Chin Malin, deputy director of the Cambodian Human Rights Committee said that the UN commissioner’s statement was a result of one-sided reports from a few civil society groups, whom, he said, were “not happy with the government.”

“The important thing is [NGOs] properly comply with the existing legal provisions in Cambodia, especially the NGO law. If they do wrong, they would have to face legal responsibility,” said Chin Malin, who is also the spokesperson for the Justice Ministry.