Hun Sen blasts rights defender over comments

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Prime Minister Hun Sen has criticised Licadho’s Am Sam Ath over statements the latter made about security measures the government has taken amid COVID-19 fears.

Mr Sam Ath on Radio Free Asia Sunday stated over 24 people have been arrested by the authorities for expressing their opinions about the novel coronavirus on Facebook. He said this action has made people fear about reporting the truth.

Mr Hun Sen during a press conference at the National Assembly yesterday responded by saying: “Am Sam Ath of Licadho, you must be careful with what you say. [The statement] was not freedom of expression.”

“[The country] is not yet placed in a state of emergency, but I can have you arrested because you are complicit to illegal acts in Cambodia,” he added, referring to the people arrested in recent weeks for allegedly spreading fake news.

Mr Hun Sen said he noticed opinions expressed online had negative undertones.

Mr Sam Ath, who is deputy director of the rights group, yesterday explained in a YouTube video his intention was not to support criminals.

“I have never protected people who commit illegal [acts] or a person who provokes social unrest,” he said,
Mr Sam Ath noted the purpose of his work with Licadho is to encourage law enforcement agents to respect human rights so the Kingdom can live in peace and harmony.

“I support the government’s law enforcement measures and the authorities have correctly followed the law,” he said, adding he will cooperate with the government, calling on the public to unite and fight COVID-19.

Soeung Sen Karuna, spokesman for rights group Adhoc, agreed.

“[Mr Sam Ath] does not support illegal acts, he wanted to have the freedom to express be maintained, not restricted,” Mr Sen Karuna said. “Cambodia upholds a multiparty democracy and the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression.”

Government spokesman Phay Siphan said Mr Sam Ath’s clarification video on YouTube is welcomed.

“We are now proposing a draft law on the state of emergency needed to maintain the national interest and people’s health,” Mr Siphan said.

Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, yesterday said the government must protect human rights in the Kingdom, including by shielding human rights defenders and civil society organisations.

“The threat of arrest against [Mr Sam Ath] for promoting respect to the fundamental right of freedom of expression, as enshrined in both domestic and international legislation, is extremely troubling,” Ms Sopheap said.

She said the arrest of the people accused of spreading fake news has sparked rights concerns, noting the media has published at least 22 incidents of individuals being arrested for sharing information about the novel coronavirus.

Ms Sopheap said many of them have been charged with conspiracy, incitement and providing false information.

She then urged the government to instead focus on ensuring access to vital information for Cambodians and creating an effective public health campaign and strategy to contain the virus.

“[The arrests] are creating a new threat for Cambodians and diverting attention and effort away from the pandemic,” Ms Sopheap said.

Details: https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50707763/hun-sen-blasts-rights-defender-over-comments/