Human rights amid COVID-19 in Cambodia

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UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet in a report published by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, expressed her concern over human rights violations, particularly on the freedom of speech, in Cambodia and some other countries in the Asia-Pacific during the virus health crisis. Khmer Times talks with Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, on the issue.

KT: What do you think about the current situation of human rights in Cambodia amid the COVID-19 pandemic? Which way is it heading?
Ms Sopheap: The human rights situation in Cambodia at present is troubling. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of thousands of people across the country and I am concerned that human rights have suffered during this time. For example, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen worrying increases
in arrests for exercises of fundamental freedoms, particularly freedom of expression. There has been an upsurge of people arrested for sharing information online and on social media, which has included over 40 reported arrests of people accused by the government of sharing “fake news” about the virus. There have also been arrests of journalists and members of the press, including Sok Oudom and Sovann Rithy and the subsequent withdrawal of their media licences. Both of these men are still in pre-trial detention. Human rights need to be protected and prioritised during times of crisis, rather than constricted.

**KT:** On Friday last week, the government lashed out at UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet over her accusation that the Kingdom is suppressing freedom of expression amid the COVID-19 pandemic. What is your perspective toward the remarks made by Ms Bachelet and the response given by the government?

**Ms Sopheap:** Ms Bachelet expressed legitimate concerns about freedom of expression in Cambodia during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is not the first time the government has lashed out against people who have expressed their apprehensions about the situation for freedom of expression. While we understand concerns of the government about the spread of false information during the time of a pandemic, this needs to be balanced with ensuring that individuals can exercise their fundamental freedoms and receive and impart information. Rather than condemning people who scrutinise the government, the government should use this as an opportunity to review its actions to ensure that freedom of expression is protected in Cambodia.

**KT:** Also last week, Prime Minister Hun Sen slammed Brad Adams, executive director of the Human Rights Watch-Asia, for allegedly having “double standards” after he stayed silent about the human rights violations which occurred in the US over the weekend. What can you say about that?

**Ms Sopheap:** The current situation in America is very concerning. Lives have been lost both during the protests and throughout history as a consequence of systemic racism and discrimination against black people and people of colour. These are human rights violations. CCHR condemns all human rights abuses whether they take place in Cambodia or abroad. Each State has a duty to protect the human rights of their citizens and ensure their society does not permit discrimination on the basis of race, colour or any other status. We call for all violence to stop and for citizens to be protected from torture and cruel, degrading or inhuman treatment. We further call for peaceful protests, but remind States that their obligation to protect citizens extends to violent protests. State use of force must only be exercised when it is strictly necessary. Current events in America should not be used by the Royal Government of Cambodia as a political tool to deflect attention away from the human rights situation in Cambodia. Human rights organisations are entitled to speak out on human rights abuses globally by exercising their freedom of expression, but ultimately States hold the obligations to respect, protect and fulfill human rights.
KT: What do you think should the government do to improve human rights in Cambodia? And how can a balance between freedom of expression and protection of social stability be reached?

Ms Sopheap: The RGC should commit to the protection and promotion of human rights, as enshrined in our domestic and international law, in all spheres. When developing measures and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial that the government considers their impact on human rights, including disproportionate impacts on minority groups, women and LGBTQI individuals. If any human rights are limited in pursuit of social stability, including freedom of expression, this needs to be genuinely necessary and done in line with domestic and international human rights law.

KT: What is your prediction about the human rights situation in Cambodia in the future, say in the next five years? What do you expect?

Ms Sopheap: The future of the human rights situation in Cambodia is gloomy. There is a restrictive legal environment that prevents full participation from those seeking to protect human rights, as civil society organisations operate in constricted civic space and human rights defenders are subject to frequent harassment and intimidation. Moreover, the political structure is not conducive to government accountability, as we have a de facto one party state, with no strong political opposition remaining. However, our growing youth and citizens, who are increasingly informed, represent a glimmer of hope, as I am confident that more informed citizens can be agents for change, holding the government accountable for a brighter future for human rights.