Sweden cancels aid to Cambodia, shifting focus to civil society

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The Swedish government announced today it will cease providing development assistance, starting from July 1, and will redirect its focus to human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

According to a press release issued by the Embassy of Sweden in Phnom Penh, the decision was made on the grounds that the Kingdom in recent years has severely restricted democratic space, human rights, civil society and the media.

“This has made it difficult to pursue broad and close cooperation,” said Sweden’s Minister for International Development Cooperation Peter Eriksson.
“The Government has therefore chosen to redirect our development efforts to offer better support for change with regards to human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the country,” he said, adding that the Swedish government will continue to support civil society, human rights defenders and democracy advocates in Cambodia.

According to the embassy, in 2019 the Swedish government provided nearly 230 million Swedish kronor (about $24 million) as development assistance to the Kingdom, based on the bilateral development cooperation. The Scandinavian country’s humanitarian aids to Cambodia started in 1979.

Mr Phay Siphan, the government spokesman, said the Swedish government has the right to make decisions regarding its foreign aid but it should respect and understand the Cambodian government’s effort in strengthening its democracy.

“Democratisation in Cambodia is still a work in progress and the government is putting a lot of effort in implementing reform” Mr Siphan said, adding the government has held regular general elections and have introduced numerous legislative and judicial reforms.

Mr Siphan said the Swedish government should understand what Cambodia has been going through in its journey from a war-torn country to one of the fastest-growing economy in the region.

“We need more time. Meanwhile, we have to prioritise peace and stability while protecting human rights and we do not want anyone to obstruct this process,” he said.

Mr Chin Malin, Vice-President of the Cambodian Human Rights Committee, said he respected the Swedish government’s decision as an aid donor, as different countries have various views and understanding of human rights and democracy. In addition, he believes redirecting assistance to civil society alone will fail to promote human rights and democracy in the Kingdom.

“The civil society is fighting against the government and when they (the Swedish government) assist them to do so, it will result in failure,” Mr Malin said.

“In order to succeed, it should involve the cooperation of all parties. That means both the government and the civil society have to work together to strengthen human rights and democracy, no matter how long it takes.”

Meanwhile, Mrs Chak Sopheap, the Executive Director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), said although it is important for Sweden to continue its support in the promotion and protection of human rights in Cambodia, the removal of aid from other areas of development could have serious implications for development in Cambodia.
“International support to strengthen human rights, democracy and the rule of law will help to protect these rights, but the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) must be dedicated to creating a lasting change in order for real improvements to be felt,” Mrs Sopheap told Khmer Times in an email today.

“The RGC should demonstrate its commitment to improving democracy, human rights and the rule of law across the country, and should do so through concrete actions.”

“This will require both legal and political reform prioritising the promotion and respect of human rights.”

Details: https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50733299/sweden-cancels-aid-to-cambodia-shifting-focus-to-civil-society/