Officials reject calls to drop charge against unionist

Ben Sokhean / Khmer Times
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Rong Chhun inspects a marker along the Cambodia-Vietnam border. Facebook

Government officials yesterday rejected requests from international unions and civil society organisations to drop the charge against union leader Rong Chhun who was arrested over a remark he made concerning border issues.

Chhun, president of the Cambodian Confederation of Unions and a member of the Cambodia Watchdog Council, was arrested on Friday evening for alleged “incitement” over the border demarcation issues with Vietnam.

Chin Malin, a Justice Ministry spokesman, said yesterday the authorities has enough evidence to arrest Chhun over his statement about the ongoing border demarcation work with Vietnam.

“The authorities have a solid foundation for arresting [Rong Chhun], they did it based on facts and the law,” he said.

Malin rejected the demands to drop the charge or release Chhun, saying the calls were irresponsible. He urged those who made such calls to provide legal assistance and provide evidence to clear Chhun, rather than pressure the court.

“If any parties are not happy or disagree with the authorities, they can participate in the court procedure by defending him. This is the only option they have in a democratic, rule-of-law system,” he said.
Since Chhun’s arrest last week, groups of activists, ex-CNRP, members of civil society organisations, national and international unions as well as ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) have issued separate statements, calling for the immediate release of the union leader.

In its statement, APHR called on Cambodian authorities to immediately release and unconditionally drop all charges against Chhun and end all attacks on those that peacefully voice their concerns.

A joint statement by 141 local NGOs and associations, including Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM), Cambodia Institute of Democracy (CID) and Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL), said Chhun had given a radio interview just hours before his arrest denying he had been spreading false information.

“This charge – which could see Rong Chhun sentenced to up to two years in prison – is a clear violation of the unionist’s right to freedom of expression as guaranteed by Cambodia’s constitution.” the statement said.

In a joint letter to Prime Minister Hun Sen early this week, the Belgium-based International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and ITUC Asia-Pacific (ITUC-AP) condemned the arrest.

“We notice with great concern that Rong Chhun’s arrest took place against the background of his recent trade union activities and criticisms on the impact of the government’s policies under the economic downturn brought by the COVID-19 pandemic,” the joint letter said.

“The ITUC and ITUC-AP urge the government of Cambodia to immediately drop all the charges against Rong Chhun and detained trade unionists and to commit to respect fundamental rights and freedoms under the international human rights treaties.” it added.

However, ruling CPP spokesman Sok Eysan said yesterday that Chhun was arrested for a crime related to his statement over border issues which are not related to his union activities.

He said the government arrested someone who committed a crime, which has nothing to do with human rights violations.

“Those who are calling for Rong Chhun’s release are just making noise from outside because to release someone or not is a decision for the Cambodian court to make,” Eysan said, adding that the decision to detain Chhun was reasonable.

He said the international NGOs have no right to pressure the court over his case and also questioned the political agenda of the local NGOs.
Additionally, the Cambodia Border Affairs Committee on Tuesday night, also issued an official explanation over the land border demarcation with Vietnam.

The statement was in response to recent criticisms and an allegation from the court dissolved CNRP’s activists that the border topographic maps scaled, 1:25,000, were drawn up by the Vietnamese side after CBAC officials last week had met with the Vietnamese side in Vietnam’s Tay Ninh province to examine and agree on the maps.

CBAC said the “outlawed rebel group and its accomplices,” which refers to the activists from the former CNRP, has been spreading “fake news” to cause confusion on the issue both within and outside the country.

It noted the topographic maps scaled of 1:25,000 were drawn up based on data from the 1:100,000 scale maps printed in the French colonial era, except in some areas where land was swapped between the two nations.

CBAC said printing work was done in Denmark by BlomInfo A/S in 2011 and Niras Mapping A/S in 2013.

It called on Cambodians, both inside and outside the country, “not to believe and not to spread any false statements” over the border maps, saying they would face legal action.

Details: https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50752220/officials-reject-calls-to-drop-charge-against-unionist/