Cambodia police chief sacked over sexual misconduct in landmark case

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PHNOM PENH (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - A high-ranking Cambodian police official has been sacked over sexual misconduct at work in a landmark case in the Southeast Asian nation but will not be prosecuted to “protect the dignity” of the women involved, a police official said.

Two-star general and Kampong Thom provincial police chief Ouk Kosal was suspended last month pending an investigation into accusations of sexual misconduct made by four junior female officers that hit the headlines.

In a rare public outing of sexual misconduct by an official, he was accused of forcing the female officers to perform sex acts at work under the threat of blocking their careers.

A deputy national police chief Pen Vibol, who led the investigation, said Kosal had been sacked and would be demoted to the rank of colonel.

But he said the female officers had chosen to not press criminal charges of sexual assault, which is punishable by up to three years jail, prompting calls for the government to do so.

“This is an unprecedented case where, instead of asking our female police officers to be cautious, we need to strengthen the ethics among leaders of our police units,” Vibol told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.
“The fact that they became victims is embarrassing enough. They are satisfied ... that justice has been delivered and they can return to work and restore their dignity.”

National police spokesman Chhay Kim Khoeun said there was insufficient evidence to build a criminal case against Kosal, who has maintained that he is innocent.

The women officers and Kosal could not be reached.

Pradeep Wagle, Cambodia representative for the Office of the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Human Rights, said Cambodia was obliged under international law to conduct a full and credible investigation and hold Kosal accountable.

The case hit headlines during an escalating public debate over the treatment of women in Cambodia, where a draft law to restrict what women can wear has raised concerns of further entrenching a culture of victim blaming in sex crimes.

The accusers said in a report to Interior Minister Sar Kheng that previous complaints about Kosal’s misconduct had been met with ridicule and threats and it was only when their accusations hit the press that action was taken.

Women rights’ campaigners criticised the Interior Ministry’s decision to not pursue charges against Kosal.

“(This) sends the disturbing message that sexual assault and harassment is tolerated in Cambodia,” said Chak Sopheap, head of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights.

“Sexual and gender-based violence cannot continue to continue to be met with impunity, as it has been for too long in this country.”
The Women’s Affairs Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

Amnesty International said accountability for sexual crimes “remains elusive in Cambodia”, adding it was typical for officials to return to top positions when media attention ended.

“This is PR, not accountability,” a spokesman told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Last year, the United Nations highlighted social norms in Cambodia that “justify gender-based violence”.

It called for the elimination of the chbap srey, an ancient code of conduct that was part of official school curricula until 2007 and teaches women to be submissive and quiet.