Cambodia’s representative to UN interrupts activist monk at rights council

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Prominent activist monk Luon Sovath’s speech to the United Nations Human Rights Council on October 2 was repeatedly interrupted by Cambodia’s permanent representative in Geneva, who said Sovath is “not a real monk” and brought up the rape and defamation charges against him, which the monk has denied.

For more than a decade, Luon Sovath has spoken out on behalf of those affected by land disputes, contributed to the monitoring efforts of NGOs and joined protests in support of jailed activists. In June, he was defrocked for allegedly having inappropriate relations with several women, claims that he and civil society organizations have said are politically motivated.
During the 31st meeting of the 45th Regular Session of the council, An Sokkhoeurn, Cambodia’s permanent representative in Geneva, thrice interrupted Sovath, who was a guest speaker, questioning the accreditation of Sovath’s affiliated NGO, World Organization Against Torture, and his legitimacy as a monk.

“If he’s a member of an NGO, why does he also serve as a monk?” Sokkhoeurn asked, when the council’s vice president called on him the second time.

After the monk introduced himself for a third time, Sokkhoeurn was again allowed permission to speak.

“We question the status and legitimacy of this representative and of the NGO,” he said. “According to the information that the government has sent to me, he is not a real monk, he has been defrocked in Cambodia already. Secondly, he also has been charged with rape and defamation according to article 239 and 305 of the Criminal Code of Cambodia.”

Despite the repeated interjections from Sokkhoeurn, the UN vice president allowed Venerable Luon Sovath to continue, saying that the Human Rights Council is not the place to discuss such accusations.

The monk told the council of the deteriorating human rights situation in Cambodia.

“They [are] killing democracy, there are no free elections, no freedom of expression, no freedom of assembly,” he said. “Many activists have been arrested, tortured, and have fled the country. Myself and other human rights activists have been documenting abuses.”

“We are driven by a desire for peace and justice. I call on the international community to come to the rescue of democracy,” he said, before the vice president informed him that his allotted speaking time had run out.

Before Sovath began his speech, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia, Rhona Smith, had expressed her concerns over a lack of progress in Cambodia’s human rights record. She brought up the ongoing detention and increased arrests of former opposition party members, the
infringement of citizens’ rights to freedom of assembly and expression, and security guards’ repeated use of violence against protesters.

Sokkhoeurn refuted the special rapporteur’s comments.

“[UN] Secretary-General [Antonio] Guterres stressed that we cannot choose and pick among human rights. Regrettably, the SR’s annual report deviates from this approach due to the one-sided and excessive focus on civil and political rights with many positive developments under-reported,” he said, going on to list the government’s recent achievements in human rights.

Siem Reap Provincial Court spokesman Choun Sopanha said October 2 that the court had charged Loun Sovath with rape and public defamation, and that the investigating judge is still processing the case.

According to Article 239 of the Criminal Code, rape carries a penalty of five to ten years in jail and a fine of 4 million to 10 million riel.

Venerable Luon Sovath denied the charges against him, saying they were only brought due to the political influence of the ruling CPP.

“The accusations are politically motivated, and there is nothing strange about it because the Cambodian courts just follow the politicians,” he said by messenger from Switzerland, where he has been granted political asylum.

Venerable Luon Sovath said he fled Cambodia in May when he found out that the court had begun preliminary investigations into the audio recordings, spending one month as a refugee in Thailand before being granted asylum.

The monk said the Cambodian permanent representative’s violation of free speech was made worse by the fact that he did it in a democratic setting at the UN Human Rights Council.

“He [An Sokkhoeurn] has asserted that Cambodia has a good human rights record, but the fact is that he violated human rights in front of the United Nations,” he said.
“He interrupted me because he was trying to hide the truth from the world and the UN Human Rights Council by saying that Cambodia does not violate human rights, hasn’t dissolved the CNRP and hasn’t killed democracy,” he said.

Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, said Sokkhoeurn’s attempt to silence Venerable Sovath during the allotted speaking time for civil society “illustrates further the targeting of civil society and human rights defenders in Cambodia.”

She said that the attempted silencing was especially damaging after the council had heard Smith and the council’s representatives for many other nations express deep concern for freedom of expression in Cambodia.

“The government must respect the right to freedom of expression in line with its human rights obligations, and should use its dialogue with the Human Rights Council as an opportunity to improve its human rights situation, not to discredit the voices of civil society and human rights defenders,” Sopheap said.

In a statement on June 3, the Monk Council in Siem Reap said it had decided to defrock Venerable Luon Sovath after seeing four recordings posted to Facebook in which the monk allegedly held sexual conversations with four women, although it has not been verified whether the male voice in the recordings belonged to Venerable Luon Sovath.

At the time, Sovath was living at Sleng pagoda in Siem Reap province’s Chi Kreng district.

“If Luon Sovath is still wearing monk robes as if he is part of the clergy, I ask the provincial monk chief and authorities to take legal action,” Siem Reap Provincial monk chief Chum Kimleng said in the statement.

The Siem Reap Provincial Court had launched its investigation into the rape case against Sovath in late May, after one of the women heard in the recordings filed a complaint, according to police.
Siem Reap Provincial Deputy Police Chief Doung Thavry said at the time that one of the victims filed a complaint against the activist monk after she had seen that her story had been made public on Facebook.

“The rape case happened years ago but she has just lodged a complaint because there is other recent public her defamation case in which posted on a Facebook, so she decided to file a complaint with our police,” she said.

Details: https://bit.ly/3jyiCEL