Cambodia must heed increasing international calls to respect human rights

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) welcomes the European Parliament’s adoption on October 20 of a resolution recognizing the deterioration of the human rights situation in Cambodia and the drift towards a de facto one party political system. CCHR supports the European Parliament’s call for the European Union to end the impunity with which the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has violated the rights of its citizens by ensuring that its undemocratic and repressive policies have financial consequences. CCHR also calls on the RGC to heed the increasing local and international concern over its human rights record, acknowledge that its current policies and practices are not leading to the development of a fair and just society and take measures to overhaul its priorities to ensure that it is focusing on the best interests of the Cambodian people.

In its October 20 resolution, the European Parliament acknowledged that the European Union is Cambodia’s single largest donor, support which is grounded in a 1997 Framework Cooperation Agreement between Cambodia and the European Union. Article 1 of the Agreement states that respect for democratic principles and fundamental human rights constitute “an essential element” of the Agreement. The European Parliament’s resolution urges the European Union to take steps to ensure that fundamental freedoms, as enshrined in Article 1 of the Agreement are respected, “that attacks on civil liberties have consequences” and that the European Union makes “the continuation of its financial aid conditional upon an improvement in Cambodia’s human rights record.”

In June this year, Cambodia’s international donors pledged US$1.1 billion dollars in aid to Cambodia on the same day that the Supreme Court upheld a spurious defamation conviction resulting from a complaint from the Prime Minister against opposition parliamentarian, Mu Sochua. Year-on-year increases in aid pledges from democratic nations reinforce perceptions amongst the ruling party that it can continue to sustain itself in power on the back of international financial support and a domestic strategy described by the European Parliament as “using a politically subservient judiciary to crack down on all government critics.” As proposed in the European Parliament resolution, it is vital that the nations of the European Union and other donors take concrete steps, through reviewing their aid and trade policies towards Cambodia, to ensure that the litany of human rights abused recognized in the resolution – “the stifling of fundamental freedoms, a brutal policy of land-grabbing…the suppression of all forms of criticism and protest, the persecution of the parliamentary opposition and civil society activists, the use of the courts for political ends” - cannot continue with impunity.
The recent condemnation of the international community – expressed by parliamentarians in Ireland, Canada, the United States, and now the European Union – and a series of protests in the last few months from ex-pat Cambodian communities, has proven that people around the world are starting to take notice of the human rights situation in Cambodia. This weekend many Cambodians celebrated the anniversary of the Paris Peace Accords, which gave Cambodia a chance to introduce and consolidate a stable liberal democratic system capable of providing a mechanism for the healing of previous divisions and the reconstruction and economic development of Cambodia for the benefit of all its citizens. It is time for the ruling party to focus their efforts on improving the lives of citizens rather than the consolidation and protection of their own executive power. They have a duty to all Cambodians to do so.

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