Joint Media Statement

Impunity at Work: Acid Attack Case
Verdict Shames Cambodian Judiciary

The Cambodian League for Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) and the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) jointly condemn the decision by the Phnom Penh Municipal Court to acquit former National Military Police Deputy Chief of Staff General Chea Ratha and her accomplices accused of an acid attack on Ya Soknim. The August 31 verdict, issued by judges Sin Visal, Din Sivuthy and Sem Sakola came after several inexplicable delays in the case over the past months.

Human rights activists believe the attack on Ya Soknim, that left her severely mutilated, was an act of revenge against her and her niece, the TV celebrity In Solyda, who has been estranged from Chea Ratha since early 2008.

In April 2008, Solyda left Ratha and went into hiding fearing retribution from Ratha for ending the relationship. Ratha in turn threatened Solyda’s relatives on multiple occasions in the weeks which followed, threatening to “spill blood” in her family. Ratha became particularly infuriated with Soknim, who she suspected was assisting Solyda to flee the country. In one of many conversations between Ratha and various relatives of Solyda, she explicitly named individuals she wanted to harm, including Soknim.

On the morning of May 8, 2008, two men on a motorbike accosted Soknim and poured acid on her face and upper body.

During the one-year investigation of the attack, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court received a strong body of evidence linking Chea Ratha and her associates to the crime including:

- Taped audio records of phone calls by Chea Ratha in which Ratha explicitly declared her intention to kill Solyda’s relatives
- Phone logs of Chea Ratha and her associates on the day of the attack
- A report confirming that acid was found in the house of one of Chea Ratha’s associates.

Despite that compelling evidence, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court declared the suspects not guilty.

“This is yet another blatant display of Cambodia’s rampant impunity and culture of brutal violence,” said LICADHO Director Pilorge Naly. “What is so shocking in this case is the judges’ apparent total disregard of evidence against Chea Ratha and her alleged accomplices.”
“Cambodia’s judicial system yet again allowed the strong – those with power and government connections – to victimize the weak”, said Pilorge. “Court rulings like this only ensure that acid attacks will continue because the perpetrators aren’t brought to justice.”

“The court has once more shown its lack of independence in prosecuting high ranking officials who commit crimes”, says CCHR Executive Director Ou Virak. “As long as the courts operate at the direction of the Cambodian government, rule of law will remain an empty slogan at donor conferences.”

LICADHO and CCHR strongly call for the Supreme Council of Magistracy to investigate the handling of this case by the Phnom Penh Municipal Court to determine whether the judges’ acted inappropriately in reaching their verdict. Evidence of unethical or illegal conduct should prompt an official inquiry into the case to ensure that justice is truly done.

We also urge the international donors supporting development and reform of Cambodia’s legal system to express strong concern to the Cambodian government about the case and urge the government to ensure the safety and security of Solyda and her family.

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