Violence against protestors must end now

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) condemns the shooting of three factory workers in Svey Rieng province on 20 February 2011 and calls for immediate steps to ensure that the use of violence against protestors is punished and brought to an end.

It was reported today, 21 February 2012, in The Phnom Penh Post and The Cambodia Daily that three female workers were shot in front of the Taiwanese-owned Kaoway Sports factory in Svey Rieng during a protest by workers seeking an additional $25 USD in benefits to cover transport and meal costs (The Phnom Penh Post, 'Bloody Day in Svey Rieng'; and The Cambodia Daily 'Three Shot During Violence in Economic Zone'). It is reported that the protest turned violent with workers throwing rocks through factory windows. The protest came to an end when a uniformed man opened fire on the protestors, causing life-threatening injuries to one woman and injuring two other women. Local police have denied that the shooter, who is reported to have been dressed in uniform, was a police officer. It is further reported that, since the shooting, the employer at Kaoway Sports factory has agreed to grant the benefits sought by the protestors.

The incident occurred following reports recently of an increase in the number of demonstrations occurring throughout the country and a concerning rise in the use of violence by authorities to deal with protestors. A report by the Phnom Penh municipality earlier this month states that protests in the city doubled in 2011 compared to 2010. According to the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association, 256 protests took place throughout Cambodia in 2011, compared to 183 in 2010, with approximately 50 protests involving violent confrontations between demonstrators and security forces. A press statement from the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights dated 26 January 2012 described five protests in the preceding two months where security personnel opened fire on protestors, resulting in injuries to 19 people.

Commenting on the increasing use of violence to deal with demonstrators, CCHR President Ou Virak commented:

"More and more people are taking to the streets to take part in protests in the knowledge that this is the greatest chance they have for justice. Every man, woman and child in this country has known for some time that our politically and financially controlled courts are no place for justice for the ordinary man. Cases like Boeung Kak lake then have sent a powerful message to people that, against all odds, groups and communities that protest together have some chance of achieving solutions to the problems that they face. If you kick up enough of a stink, it seems, you might get some reward. This increase in the use of extreme violence to deal with protestors is therefore an issue of utmost concern. Should this trend continue, it is only a matter of time before ordinary people are killed simply for seeking fair and equitable treatment. This country needs institutional reform – a court system that serves the people and not merely the interests of the political and economic elite. Such reform will likely take years, in the mean time therefore, those responsible for acts of violence against protestors must be brought to justice so that the use of such violence is stopped before it results in the taking of innocent lives”.

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