The rights of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly belong to the people at all times

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) is deeply concerned by the statement made by the Phnom Penh municipal police chief that authorities are preventing peaceful protests during the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) conference being held in Phnom Penh. In an article in today’s Phnom Penh Post (“Police deny baton beatdown”) Phnom Penh municipal police chief, Touch Naruth, denied claims that his officers had beaten three female garment factory workers with batons and shields during a protest on Tuesday, in which one girl’s nose was allegedly broken, and that in the lead up to next week’s ASEAN summit, the authorities were not allowing protestors to march into the city center. Mr. Touch is quoted as saying “If you want to march, wait until the ASEAN summit is complete...talk together and defend the dignity of the country – and the safety”.

Freedom of expression and assembly is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia as well as by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. Though limitations on both these rights may be permitted is certain, very specific and limited circumstances, the pretext of the ASEAN Summit is not a legitimate basis for denying these fundamental rights.

Responding to the repression of demonstration during this time, Ramana Sorn, Project Coordinator of CCHR’s Cambodian Freedom of Expression Project, stated:

“Freedom of expression and assembly are fundamental human rights as they belong to all human beings at all times. The attitude of the authorities that these fundamental rights can simply be granted and taken away at their whim indicates that they are interested in the appearance of freedom of expression and democracy rather than actually achieving these goals. As the chair of ASEAN, the Royal Government of Cambodia and all Cambodian authorities should use the opportunity of the summit not to stifle the voices of the Cambodian people but to facilitate the creation of a democratic space where ideas, concerns and opinions can be addressed. In doing this, the government can provide an example to the ASEAN community of the democratic and pluralistic community that it seeks to create.”

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