

JOINT STATEMENT

On Human Rights Day, civil society organizations call for the Royal Government of Cambodia to respect its human rights obligations

Phnom Penh, 10 December 2020 – On Human Rights Day, we the 67 undersigned civil society organizations, call on the Royal Government of Cambodia (“RGC”) to respect the democratic principles and human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (“UDHR”) and the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia (“the Constitution”), and fulfil its human rights obligations. We further call on the RGC to immediately end the targeting of activists, human rights defenders, journalists, political opposition supporters, and other critical voices that has tarnished 2020, and unconditionally release all of those arbitrarily detained.

This year marks the first time in 27 years Human Rights Day - which is celebrated across the world to commemorate the adoption of the UDHR - is not a public holiday in Cambodia. The removal of this public holiday is symbolic of the RGC’s unwillingness to promote human rights, and coincides with the increasing repression of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy in Cambodia.

Concerning legislative developments throughout the year have sought to dwindle individual freedoms, whether exercised online or offline. These include the *Law on the Management of the Nation in the State of Emergency*, promulgated in April, which grants the RGC powers to restrict the exercise of fundamental freedoms by the public without limit during a state of emergency. In addition, the January amendments to the *Law on Trade Unions* did not address the laws shortcomings, and as such the law continues to unduly restrict workers’ abilities to join and form trade unions. Further, three draft laws and sub-decrees threaten to further undermine human rights in Cambodia, namely the draft *Law on Public Order*, the draft *Sub-Decree on the Establishment of the National Internet Gateway*, and the draft *Law on Cybercrime*. If passed, these laws would criminalize everyday activities of the public both online and offline; permit the policing of clothing choices; and authorize mass surveillance and online censorship in a diminishment of fundamental freedoms.

In addition to these legislative developments, 2020 has also borne witness to significant assaults on the fundamental freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association, and Cambodia has garnered global attention due to a government crackdown on activists, human rights defenders and public-facing dissenting voices for exercising their fundamental freedoms. Over 120 individuals have been arrested so far this year for exercising their fundamental freedoms.

2020 witnessed an increase in the exercise of the **freedom of peaceful assembly** by the public. As the economic stress of COVID-19 hit the country, factory workers have increasingly taken to the streets. Communities affected by land disputes have continued to gather to seek redress from authorities, and environmental groups have protested the selling-off of Phnom Penh’s last remaining lakes. Further, groups have advocated for the release of individuals detained on perceived political charges. Concerningly, this increase in assemblies was met with interference and restrictions of assemblies by authorities and arrests of peaceful protestors. On 31 July, union leader Rong Chhun was arrested, and over 10 people were subsequently imprisoned for taking part in protests calling for his release. Further, there has been a surge in the use of force by the authorities against peaceful protestors,

which was reported in at least 15 instances in 2020, almost double the number recorded last year. Unfortunately, youth activists and women human rights defenders bore the brunt of this.

Freedom of expression has also taken a serious hit in 2020, which has been characterized by an attack on online expression. A slew of individuals have been arrested and jailed for their various online activities, including factory worker and unionist Soy Sros who shared her labor rights concerns via Facebook, and rappers Kea Sokun and Long Puthera for their songs on social issues. Press freedom has also declined, with a detrimental trend of journalists being arrested and media outlets silenced. Three journalists, Sovann Rithy, Sok Oudom, and Ros Sokhet, were arrested this year and charged with incitement under Article 495 of the Criminal Code. Ros Sokhet and Sok Oudom remain in detention, and the announcement of Sok Oudom's verdict has been postponed indefinitely. The RGC also revoked four licenses of media outlets, three of which belonged to those arrested.

Finally, **freedom of association** has also been targeted over the year. Environmental groups, such as the Prey Lang Community Network and the Mother Nature movement, as well as youth activist groups, including Khmer Thavrak, were frequently interfered with and several of their members were subject to arbitrary arrest and judicial harassment at the hands of authorities. These three groups were deemed illegal by the RGC for not complying with mandatory registration requirements of the *Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations*, which contravenes the right to freedom of association. Further, in 2020, trade unions had thousands of their members faced unemployment, with many reports of employers using COVID-19 as a guise to cull union members from their businesses. Unionists have been subject to harassment, and Mr. Touch Kosal, the president of Cambodia Tourism Workers Trade Union Federation received multiple warning letters threatening deregistration of the union from the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training because of its support for worker's strikes. Moreover, 16 November 2020 marked three years since the dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party ("CNRP"), which signaled a significant deterioration of democracy in Cambodia. Former members and supporters continue to face harassment, intimidation and violence. 2020 witnessed a mass summoning of 139 former CNRP members to attend a trial hearing on 26 November 2020 over an alleged CNRP attempt to overthrow the government, and a series of violent attacks on CNRP members by third parties that remain largely uninvestigated.

Disappointingly, these human rights abuses are not unique, but rather have been an alarming pattern over the last few years. This has had a detrimental impact on Cambodian society, deterring individuals from public participation and fostering a culture of fear, political disillusionment and self-censorship. For a peaceful and thriving society, it is crucial that everyone, by virtue of their humanity, can exercise the fundamental freedoms they are entitled to and participate in public life and democracy.

The RGC committed to upholding the human rights and democratic values enshrined in the UDHR and the core human rights conventions, and the importance of these documents is reflected by their place in the Constitution. **On Human Rights Day, we call on the RGC to respect their human rights commitments by immediately ceasing the ongoing attack against all voices of dissent in the country, and releasing those arbitrarily detained for legitimately exercising their fundamental freedoms. We urge the RGC to ensure all existing and new laws are compatible with international human rights standards and to fulfil the commitments made during Cambodia's third Universal Periodic Review.**

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This statement is endorsed by:

- 1 Affiliated Network for Social Accountability (ANSA)
- 2 Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT)
- 3 Asean Tourism Employee Union of Cambodiana Hotel (ATEUCDH)
- 4 Asean Tourism Employee Union of Raffles Le Royal Hotel (AEURLH)
- 5 Asean Tourism Employee Union of Sunway Hotel Phnom Penh (AEUSHP)
- 6 Beong Tunle Mrech Community, Preah Vihear
- 7 Boeung Bram community
- 8 Boeung Chhouk Community, Phnom Penh
- 9 Borei Keila Community, Phnom Penh
- 10 Bu Sra community, MKR
- 11 Buddhism for Peace Organization (BPO)
- 12 Building and Wood Workers Trade Union Federation of Cambodia (BWTUC)
- 13 Building Community Voices (BCV)
- 14 Cambodia Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU)
- 15 Cambodia Center for the Protection of Children's Rights (CCPCR)
- 16 Cambodia Food and Service Workers Federation (CSFWF)
- 17 Cambodia Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
- 18 Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
- 19 Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM)
- 20 Cambodian Human Rights Action Coalition (CHRAC)
- 21 Cambodian Institute for Democracy (CID)
- 22 Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC)
- 23 Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
- 24 Cambodian Tourism Workers Trade Union Federation (CTWUF)
- 25 Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
- 26 Cambodia's Independent Civil Servants Association (CICA)
- 27 Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL)

- 28 Coalition Free Trade Union of the Women Textile (CFTUWT)
- 29 Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Unions (C.CAWDU)
- 30 Coalition of Camodian Farmer Community (CCFC)
- 31 Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL)
- 32 Cooperation Committee for Cambodia Organization (CCC)
- 33 Equitable Cambodia (EC)
- 34 Fee Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC)
- 35 Former Boeung Kak Women Network Community, Phnom Penh
- 36 Free Independent Trade Union Federation (FUFI)
- 37 Gender and Development for Cambodia
- 38 Independent Democratic of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
- 39 Independent Trade Union Federation (INTUFE)
- 40 Khmer Kampuchea Krom for Human Rights and Development (KKKHRDA)
- 41 Koun Kriel Community, OMC
- 42 Labor Rights Supported Union at Nagaworld (LRSU)
- 43 Land Community, Prek Chik Village, Chikhor Kraom Commune, Koh Kong Province
- 44 Lor Peang Land Community, Kampong Chhnang Province
- 45 National Independent Federation Textile Union of Cambodia (NIFTUC)
- 46 Natural Resources Protection Community in Krakor district, Pursat province.
- 47 Network for Prey Lang Protection, Kampong Thom
- 48 Pailin Land Community, Pailin Province
- 49 Peace Bridges Organization
- 50 Phnom Bat Community
- 51 Phnom Krom Community, Siem Reap
- 52 Phum 23 Community, Phnom Penh
- 53 Prey Peay Community, Kampot
- 54 Prome Community, Preah Vihear
- 55 Railway Station, Toul Sangkae A Community, Phnom Penh
- 56 Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT)
- 57 Sdey Krom Rorhal Suong Community, Battambang

- 58 SOS International Airport Community, Phnom Penh
- 59 Tany 197 Community, Chikhor Leur commune, Koh Kong povince
- 60 The Advocacy and Policy Institute (API)
- 61 The Cambodian Center for the Protection of Children's Rights (CCPCR)
- 62 The Coalition for Integrity and Social Accountability (CISA)
- 63 Thma Da commune, Pursat province
- 64 Toul Sangke B Community, Phnom Penh
- 65 Transparency International Cambodia (TIC)
- 66 Urban Poor Women Development (UPWD)
- 67 Youth resource Development Program (YRDP)