The US Department of State has recognised detained Cambodian trade union leader Chhim Sithar as one of 10 recipients globally of the annual Human Rights Defender Award, the US embassy in Phnom Penh announced on February 1.

This award “recognises courageous individuals who show exceptional valour and leadership in advocating for the promotion and protection of universally recognised human rights and fundamental freedoms”, it said.

Sithar – head of the Labour Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees at NagaWorld – is the first recipient from Cambodia to receive the award, it added.

The embassy said Sithar was unable to travel to Washington to join the other awardees as she remained in jail pending trial, which has not been scheduled, on charges related to long-standing labour disputes at the integrated casino resort.

US ambassador W Patrick Murphy said that protecting and supporting human rights defenders is a key priority of US foreign policy.

“We applaud Sithar’s recognition as a 2022 Human Rights Defender. She is a courageous and tenacious labour union leader who peacefully advocates for the rights of Cambodian workers,” he said.

Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR), said Sithar was a brave and strong-willed union leader, one determined in defence of her members.

Having joined with numerous civil society organisations to demand respect for and the protection of human rights for ordinary people, Sopheap said Sithar deserves the award.
Sopheap said activists in general seemed to be valued more by governments abroad, and questioned whether Cambodian authorities held them in less regard as they occasionally laid accusations against them.

“Sithar deserves to be recognised and to receive this award. So I think that for us as civil society, her gaining such recognition is a cause for celebration.

“However, it would be of even more value for our government to also offer similar recognition as foreign governments do and begin providing adequate protections to human rights activists, rather than see them as a bone stuck in the throat,” she said.

Ministry of Justice spokesman Chin Malin said that while it was the right of the US, as for anyone, to bestow awards as they saw fit, upholding the Kingdom’s laws was paramount.

“It is of the highest importance that those who violate Cambodian law are held accountable.Foreigners can give awards to whoever they wish as is their political agenda,” he said.

Government spokesman Phay Siphan said Sithar being jailed was due to her circumstances with the court, and was not related to the government.

“Her personal story with a foreign government is a separate matter to her and the Cambodian government, or to her and the Cambodian court. It’s a separate case,” he added.

Sithar, along with other leaders of her union, was arrested in January 2022 for allegedly “inciting social chaos” before being released on bail in March.

On November 26, 2022, she was arrested at Phnom Penh International Airport by immigration police and detained for a second time after returning from a trip to Australia.

The court remanded Sithar in custody at the Prey Sar Correctional Centre for violating her bail conditions.