

## CSOs Continue To Press Authorities to Allow Banned STT Photo Exhibition To Resume



A restaurant staff removes STT's photos after local authorities shut down the exhibition in Chbar Ampov on February 25, 2024, a photo post on STT's Facebook.

Some 62 civil society organizations (CSOs) including Licadho, Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), and local communities have urged the authorities to allow Sahmakum Teang Tnaut's (STT) photo exhibition to resume after it was shut down two weeks ago.

They also requested the Ministry of Interior to review the activities of district and commune authorities, and hold them accountable for the suspension of the exhibition.

Deep regret and disappointment were expressed by the CSOs over Chbar Ampov district and Niroth commune authorities which ordered the Champei Garden restaurant owner to stop the exhibition and dismantle the photos on [February 25, 2024](#).

No reason or prior notice was given by the authorities before they pulled the plug on the "Home and Life" exhibition, which opened to the public two days earlier.

In a joint statement, which was posted on [STT's Facebook page](#) on Tuesday, the CSOs said the shut down of the photo exhibition without information or explanation is a "clear violation of the right to freedom of expression and an act that does not value art".

“We deeply regret the continued repression and unjustified closure of such an activity or art form as freedom of expression under the new government.”

They said Cambodia’s constitution guarantees people’s rights, freedoms and the rule of law. However, the authorities were acting in contradiction to that by “silencing the voice of civil society, who are just expressing concern over the lives of poor people in Phnom Penh city”. They should instead be solving the problems that often affect poor people, such as land grabbing and exploitative loans.

While the CSOs sought an explanation from the authorities for carrying out the act, they also requested the ministry to advise local authorities everywhere to uphold fundamental rights, so that similar incidents do not happen in future.

Licadho operations director Am Sam Ath said the objective of their statement was to urge the authorities to allow the exhibition to resume as it tells the story of poor people, as a means of creating awareness.

He added that the event took place with the consent of the restaurant and it was in accordance with the law, so the sudden ban was a “complete violation of rights that should not have happened”.

“When the authorities ban exhibitions in private venues, it’s a violation of privacy and the fundamental freedoms of people.”

Sam Ath urged the authorities to review the principles of human rights in accordance with the law, as any activity that happens in private locations, and which does not affect people, does not require the authorities’ permission.

Interior ministry spokesperson Touch Sokhak said they have “no right” to issue orders to local authorities or the private sector to suspend any social activity. He suggested that STT meet the local authorities directly to resolve the issue because the latter has a “legal obligation to manage public order and security”.

“They should meet with the authorities to discuss mechanisms or procedures for a smooth implementation of future activities. I think if there’s cooperation, it’s clear that the process will be smooth and efficient,” Sokhak told CamboJA. “We are afraid they are not cooperating [but] want to overcome [the problem] by any means. This is not a good culture,” he added.

He opined that at the time of the ban, it was likely that the authorities intended to maintain order in preparation for the [national senate election](#).

Chbar Ampov district governor Cheng Monyra could not be reached for comment via phone or Telegram, and Niroth commune chief Tep Prommony said she was unwell, so she could not speak.

Niroth commune police chief Hor Sylihov also declined to comment, urging the reporter to contact the commissioner instead.