Fact Sheet: Case Study Series: Loun Sovath

**Snapshot:** Continued threats are being made against the Venerable Loun Sovath by the national and local authorities and by the Buddhist “sangha”. Threatened with arrest and refused entry to his own pagoda and others around Phnom Penh, Loun Sovath is being forced to live in hiding as a result of trying to provide a voice for innocent people who are subjected to severe human rights abuses – in violation of his right to freedom of expression as enshrined in domestic and international law.

**Introduction**

The Venerable Loun Sovath, a 31-year-old Buddhist monk from Chi Kreang commune, Siem Reap province, is a human rights defender and a representative for the disenfranchised Chi Kreang community. He also writes and compiles documentaries, songs and poetry in order to promote human rights. This fact sheet provides an insight into the issues that Loun Sovath works on and the various challenges that he now faces from both the political and religious authorities as a result of his actions. This fact sheet is written by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (“CCHR”), a non-aligned, independent, non-governmental organization (“NGO”) that works to promote and protect democracy and respect for human rights – primarily civil and political rights – throughout Cambodia.

**A monk of the people**

Originally from Siem Reap’s Chi Kreang commune, Loun Sovath became an outspoken voice on land rights issues after members of his community were detained and injured in the midst of a still-ongoing land dispute in which 175 families have had their farmland forcibly taken away by military and police forces at the behest of a private company that allegedly has political connections. Four men, including Loun Sovath’s older brother, Mr Loun Vinh, and his nephew, Mr Loun Men, were shot and left alone in the hospital as no family members were present to sign the requisite documentation. His nephew-in-law, Mr Chan Noun, was among those arrested. He immediately began filming and taking photographs of the aftermath at the local hospital, in order to prove that they had genuinely been shot, since, without video evidence, the Cambodian authorities will very often, as Loun Sovath puts it, “turn black into white and white into black.”

This incident motivated Loun Sovath to become a distinctive and distinguished presence at various prominent land protests, joining protests against the displacement of around 4,000 families from Boeng Kak lake, Phnom Penh, as a result of a joint venture development project between a Chinese developer and Shukaku Inc., owned by a ruling party senator. Loun Sovath has also joined protests against the granting of 40,000 hectares of old growth forest in Prey Lang, Kampong Thom province, as an economic land concession to a Vietnamese rubber corporation and the issuing of 27 mineral exploration permits in the same region. On 25 May 2011, during a protest in Phnom Penh against the granting of land concessions in Prey Lang, Loun Sovath was forced to flee the scene with the assistance of human rights groups when it appeared that local authorities were either planning his arrest or merely trying to intimidate him. As well as frequently joining land dispute protests and advocating on behalf of displaced villagers, Loun Sovath also makes regular visits to Cambodia’s prisons to bless the prisoners.

**Price to Pay**

On 26 April 2011 the Venerable Nun Ngeth, the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch in Phnom Penh, issued an official letter claiming that the actions of Loun Sovath had “caused villagers to think badly about
Buddhism.” As a result of his activities as a human rights defender, Loun Sovath was banned from his home at Ounalom pagoda and other pagodas around Phnom Penh. In response, human rights groups have defended Loun Sovath’s activism by pointing to the fact that the monastic code “Vinaya” prohibits political rather than social activism, and have claimed that the Venerable Nun Ngeth’s comments were themselves politically motivated, since the senior leadership of the Cambodian “sangha” (the Buddhist fraternity) allegedly has close ties to the ruling Cambodian People’s Party. Loun Sovath shows constant compassion by attending protests in solidarity with the people, and compassion is one of the two main qualities required to achieve Buddhist enlightenment – the other being wisdom – and is therefore central to Buddhist practice. Loun Sovath has also suffered persecution from government authorities: he has been threatened with arrest at several demonstrations and, because of the pagoda ban, he is separated from his religious community in Phnom Penh, relying on support from others to continue his human rights work. He is also subject to continuous monitoring by the Buddhist authorities and by the local Chi Kreng police when he visits his homeland. Disregarding the threats against him, he states: “I’m satisfied that I do everything for the people, for the community and for justice, for rights and freedom and for peace.”

Denial of freedom of expression
It is evident that the crackdown on Loun Sovath’s movements and the efforts by local and government authorities to silence him are in direct breach of his rights to freedom of expression and assembly, which are enshrined in both domestic and international law – under Article 41 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia (the “Constitution”), and Articles 19 and 21, respectively, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Cambodia acceded to and ratified in 1992, and which was incorporated into Cambodia’s domestic law by virtue of Article 31 of the Constitution. However, the authorities conveniently ignore these legal instruments in their eagerness to prevent Loun Sovath from informing the wider community about various human rights abuses committed by wealthy and well-connected companies and individuals. Freedom of expression is considered to be the cornerstone of democratic rights and freedoms in the international sphere, but in Cambodia it is often viewed as subversive, something that should be suppressed irrespective of the cost.

Conclusion
As a result of his presence at a number of highly-publicized protests, such as those relating to the cases of Prey Lang forest and Boeng Kak lake, Loun Sovath is repeatedly threatened by local and national authorities, and his right to express his views and opinions freely is constantly being stifled. Furthermore, he has been treated as an outsider by the Buddhist order, which has chosen to refuse him access to any pagoda in Phnom Penh. Irrespective of the threats that he faces from both local and national authorities, as well as from the Buddhist sangha, Loun Sovath refuses to remain silent, is resolute in his determination to help individuals who are being persecuted, and stands firmly by his beliefs: “To be a human rights defender, you must have a broad heart for humanity and humankind, regardless of the personal cost to yourself.”

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