In recent days, Immigration Department officials have been quoted in the media saying that Spanish activist Alex Gonzalez-Davidson will be forced to leave the country, in what appears to be an attempt to put a stop to his environmental and human rights activism in the Areng Valley. The comments follow earlier reported statements by Cambodia People’s Party lawmaker and National Assembly spokesperson Chheang Vun, that the Royal Government of Cambodia (“RGC”) intended to arrest and deport an unnamed foreign national, widely believed to be Mr. Gonzalez-Davidson.

Part of the Central Cardamom Protected Forest, the Areng Valley has been the scene of numerous protests after local communities, most of whom belong to the Jong indigenous group, began opposing the construction of the Chhay Areng dam, currently in development by Chinese company Sinohydro Resources (“Sinohydro”). If built, local villagers say that the dam’s reservoir would flood their ancestral lands, sacred forests and burial sites, as well as damaging the natural environment. Mr. Gonzalez-Davidson works with Mother Nature, an NGO comprising of a network of local community representatives campaigning against the dam.

Reported comments from Koh Kong provincial governor Bun Leut suggest that Interior Minister Sar Kheng has ordered immigration officials not to renew Mr. Gonzalez-Davidson’s visa, after he and local activists set up a roadblock to prevent Sinohydro staff from reaching the proposed dam construction site in March 2014. Mr. Gonzalez-Davidson has not received any communication from the authorities, suggesting that officials are content to issue public threats of deportation, which will undoubtedly cause concern among Cambodian NGOs that any foreign staff the employ could face similar punitive measures if they engage in work deemed undesirable by the RGC. If Mr. Gonzalez-Davidson were deported, he would be the first foreign NGO worker to be forced out of Cambodia since Global Witness staff were barred from entering the country in 2005.

Tensions in the Areng Valley rose in December 2014, when Royal Cambodian Armed Forces soldiers threatened to smash cameras belonging to a group of Mother Nature activists and other local community members near Chun Noab village, Chun Noab Commune. The soldiers also said that a group of government officials and representatives from the company managing the dam construction would be conducting feasibility studies in the area “very soon,” and that a larger group of soldiers would accompany them to provide security, raising fears of further confrontation.

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