Local community activists in Koh Kong exposed to risks following deportation of foreign colleague

On 23 February 2014, Cambodian immigration authorities deported Spanish national Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson of the environmental activist network Mother Nature, following a decision by the Interior Ministry not to renew his visa, which had expired three days earlier. The move is widely seen as a retaliatory measure, which follows Mother Nature’s campaign against the construction of the Chhay Areng hydropower dam in the Areng Valley, Koh Kong Province.

Alejandro (Alex) Gonzalez-Davidson and Khmer colleague Mr. San Mala had been arrested in Phnom Penh earlier the same day; the latter was released after several hours without charge. At the same time, there are concerns that the other members of Mother Nature based in Koh Kong will be subjected to close control by the authorities, and that their actions could be arbitrarily restricted. In the hours before Gonzalez-Davidson’s deportation, Prime Minister Hun Sen was quoted as saying: “Regarding Alex [Gonzalez-Davidson], let the Ministry of Interior take measures. It’s not just foreigners, it’s also Khmers that will be sentenced and other NGOs shouldn’t express much.”

Gonzalez-Davidson and local colleagues set up a roadblock to prevent staff of Sinohydro Resources (“Sinohydro”), the company managing the dam project, from reaching the construction site in March 2014. Tensions in the area rose again in December 2014, when Royal Cambodian Armed Forces soldiers threatened to smash cameras belonging to a group of Mother Nature activists. The soldiers also said that a group of government officials and Sinohydro representatives 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. Following Gonzalez-Davidson’s arrest, Mother Nature members told CCHR that company representatives had again entered the Areng Valley.

The Royal Government of Cambodia must ensure that human rights and environmental activists are able to carry out their work free from threats, acts of intimidation or attacks, and that the arrest of Gonzalez-Davidson is not used as a pretext to pressure local communities in the Areng Valley over the construction of the Chhay Areng dam. CCHR reiterates that the Cambodian Constitution and binding international treaties to which Cambodia is a party, guarantee the right to freedom of expression, which includes the “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of
frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice,”¹ as well as the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

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¹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19.2