Mother Nature’s activists arrested in Phnom Penh while attempting to protest against sand dredging activities in Koh Kong

Today at about 9am, Sorn Chandara, Dim Kundy and Chek Netra, three environmental activists of the network Mother Nature, were arrested while attempting to hold a peaceful demonstration in front of the National Assembly in Phnom Penh. Dit Sothy, a staff member of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) who was monitoring the situation, was also put under arrest. Between twenty and twenty-five people were expected to attend, but the police intervened before demonstrators could gather, so impeding the demonstration.

The four men were arrested for protesting without authorization and brought to Khan Chamkar Morm office for questioning. One of the activists was reportedly slapped by a police officer while trying to prevent the confiscation of demonstration materials. They were released after few hours without charge. In order to be released, Sorn Chandara, Dim Kundy and Chek Netra were requested to sign statements pledging that they would inform the authorities of protests in the future.

Mother Nature’s activists were attempting to gather and submit a petition to the National Assembly to protest against controversial sand dredging activities in Sakor district, Koh Kong province. The dredging operations have stirred up serious concern from environmentalists, tourism operators and villagers in the area, who have said it is severely damaging the mangroves system and the local environment.

The incident raises once again serious concerns with regard to the space for Cambodian citizens to exercise their fundamental freedoms. 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 arbitrary arrests. The government must also put an end to the repeated practice of forcing human rights defenders and citizens from signing statements that restrict their rights in order to be released or avoid charges. This practice unlawfully restricts the exercise of the rights to freedom of expression and assembly and has been recently condemned by the UN Human Rights Committee during the second review of Cambodia.

CCHR reiterates that the Cambodian Constitution and binding international treaties to which Cambodia is a party guarantee the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, expression and association.

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