Areng Valley activist arrested and jailed in Koh Kong

Date: 07 October 2015
Name: Ven Vorn
Category of activist: Environmental Activist
Location: Koh Kong
Rights Involved: Freedom of Expression; Freedom of Association

Brief Description:

Today at around 12.20pm, Mr. Ven Vorn, an Areng Valley environmental activist and indigenous people’s representative, was arrested and sent to Koh Kong provincial prison. The arrest followed the decision of investigating judge Mr. Min Makara, who had questioned Ven Vorn this morning in relation to two charges: Harvesting timber products and/or non-timber forest products without a permit, under Article 98 of the Forestry Law; and Destruction of Evidence, under Article 533 of the Criminal Code. Both of these charges relate to the construction by Mr. Vorn and local activists of a small visitor center and community meeting place for local activists involved in the campaign against the proposed construction of a hydroelectric dam in the Areng Valley. For this project, Mr. Vorn and others had purchased approximately 10 cubic meters of wood from a vendor in 2014, and the authorities allege that the vendor procured the wood through illegal logging.

Mr. Vorn has been targeted by the authorities due to his activism in the past. He was questioned at the Koh Kong provincial court on 03 April 2015 in relation to the same alleged logging incident cited above, but was released on the same day. More recently, Mr. Vorn was among the 17 people arrested outside Koh Kong provincial court on 02 September 2015, where he was protesting for the release of three jailed activists from the environmental NGO, Mother Nature. The three Mother Nature activists were also active in protesting against the hydroelectric dam, and have been in detention since 17 August.

1 Alex Gonzales-Davidson, the founder of Mother Nature, was previously de facto deported from Cambodia as a result of his activism on 23 February 2015. See: http://cchrcambodia.org/index_old.php?url=media/media.php&p=alert_detail.php&alid=59&id=5
Mr. Ven Vorn is a community leader for the indigenous Jong minority in Koh Kong province. CCHR has previously interviewed and profiled Mr. Ven Vorn and his community, and his profile can be found here. He has led the local community in Thmo Bang District in their campaign to stop the proposed Areng hydroelectric dam project, which threatens their land, livelihoods and the natural environment. The proposed dam is to be constructed by Chinese company Sinohydro, allegedly in cooperation with well-connected Cambodian partners.

The incident is yet another example of the rapidly intensifying crackdown on dissent which is being undertaken by the Royal Government of Cambodia. A spate of politically-motivated arrests and convictions in recent months – in Koh Kong province and across the country – is threatening the foundations of democracy in Cambodia.

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

For more information please contact CCHR’s Senior Researcher, Chor Chanthyda, via telephone at +855 (0) 12 515 506 or email at thyda@cchrcambodia.org; or Pat de Brún, Consultant, via telephone at +855 (0) 89 536 215 or email at pat.debrun@cchrcambodia.org.