

Swedish Embassy Moved to Bangkok As Cambodia Continues Democratic Decline

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The Facebook page of the Embassy of Sweden in Phnom Penh, as seen in a screenshot on November 27, 2020. (Facebook)

PHNOM PENH —

The Swedish government on Thursday announced the closure of its embassy in Phnom Penh, a move some observers said was linked to the Scandinavian country's decision in June to cease bilateral aid on account of Cambodia's democratic backslide.

The Swedish Foreign Ministry said the embassy would be closed at the end of 2021 and its diplomatic presence in Bangkok would be given additional responsibility for Cambodia. It maintained that the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency will continue its work in the country.

“Sweden has good relations with Cambodia. These will now continue in new ways,” read [the November 26 statement](#).

The Swedish government did not give any specific reasons for the decision except to say the Foreign Ministry had to adapt to “external changes and

new monitoring and service requirements.”

Observers and rights activists said the embassy closure was possibly linked to a statement in June where the Swedish Foreign Ministry announced the end of bilateral aid to the Cambodian government and to redirect funds to strengthening human rights defenders and democracy advocates.

“The democratic space in Cambodia has been severely restricted in recent years. This has made it difficult to pursue broad and close cooperation,” said Minister for International Development Cooperation Peter Eriksson in the statement.

“The Government has therefore chosen to redirect our development efforts to offer better support for change with regard to human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the country.”

Sweden has been a vocal critic of the government’s ongoing crackdown since 2017 where it has outlawed the primary opposition party, forced the closure of independent news organizations and targeted non-governmental organizations.

The Swedish Embassy in Phnom Penh responded with almost similar language seen in the November 26 statement when asked if the closure of the embassy was linked to recent events that have worsened Cambodia’s human rights and democratic situation.



In this photo published on the Facebook page of the Swedish Embassy in Phnom Penh on October 28, 2020, embassy staff welcomed Ms. Chak Sopheap and her colleagues from the Cambodian Center for Human Rights and says its supports human rights issues in Cambodia. (Facebook/Embassy of Sweden in Phnom Penh)

Chak Sopheap, executive director of Cambodian Center for Human Rights, said the decision was linked to the human rights and democratic situation in Cambodia, pointing to the refocus of aid announced in June.

“I think if this decision is related to human rights and if there is any improvement in the human rights situation, it may help them reconsider this decision,” she said.

According to Swedish Embassy website, Sweden established diplomatic relations with Cambodia in 1961. For many years Sweden was represented in Cambodia through the Embassy of Sweden in Bangkok and its Section Office for Development Cooperation in Phnom Penh. In August 2010 Sweden opened an Embassy in Cambodia.

Political commentator Meas Nee said Sweden had invested in promoting good governance in Cambodia, but had likely seen no improvements in the democratic and human rights situation.

“[Sweden] are hopeless about that,” he said. “I think it is a warning to Cambodia as well.”

Sok Eysan, a ruling party spokesperson and senator, did not want to comment on the embassy closure but denied that it was linked to dissatisfaction with Cambodia’s domestic situation.

Koy Kuong, Foreign Ministry spokesperson, said the closure of the embassy would not affect bilateral relations.

“It is the internal affairs of Sweden to close or open its embassies overseas,” he said.

Details: <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/swedish-embassy-moved-to-bangkok-as-cambodia-continues-democratic-decline/5678757.html>