

Sweden moves diplomatic mission following termination of bilateral aid

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Swedish Ambassador Björn Häggmark gives a speech at a CamboJA event in 2019.
Panha Chhorpoan

The Swedish government will close its embassy in Phnom Penh and move it to Bangkok, a decision government officials said was not indicative of a deterioration in bilateral ties.

The announcement was made on Thursday that the embassy would be closed by the end of 2021 and moved to Bangkok. The statement added that the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency would continue its work in Cambodia.

The Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) said they would find “new ways” to continue engagement with Cambodia and did not provide any specifics for why the decision was taken.

“These changes are part of the MFA’s continuous adaptation of its organization abroad to external changes and new monitoring and service requirements. This is a constant process of change and involves Sweden sometimes opening or closing embassies and consulates.

The announcement comes months after Sweden announced its decision to stop all bilateral aid to Cambodia in July 2021. It said the deterioration in Cambodia’s human rights and democratic situation had forced the move, and that it would redirect these funds to support human rights defenders and democracy advocates.

“The Government has therefore chosen to redirect our development efforts to offer better support for change with regards to human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the country,” Swedish Minister for International Development Cooperation Peter Eriksson said in a June statement.

The Swedish Embassy did not respond to requests for comment on Friday.

Sweden has routinely expressed its displeasure at the government’s targeting of the Cambodia National Rescue Party, independent media organizations and civil society groups.

But government officials said they were unperturbed with the Swedish government’s decision.

Koy Kuong, spokesperson for the Foreign Affairs Ministry, said in messages sent on Telegram that the closure or opening of embassies was Sweden’s internal affairs and moving of the diplomatic mission would not affect the bilateral relations.

“The announcement for closure of the embassy does not affect relations between Cambodia and Sweden,” said Kuong.

Phay Siphon, a spokesperson for the Cambodian government, said in the past Sweden had its diplomatic mission in Thailand and relations were cordial even then.

“So, it is not surprising because it is just a change of their administration and it is their internal affairs,” said Siphon.

He noted that Cambodia and Sweden did not have any challenges in their relationship and that the government viewed all countries as friends.

Chak Sopheap, executive director at right group Cambodian Center for Human Rights, hoped that the Swedish embassy would continue to engage with Cambodian civil society groups, who were “fighting” to protect human rights in the country.

“I was surprised to see that the Government of Sweden has made the decision to close their embassy in Phnom Penh,” she said. “Their presence in the country has been very important and I am saddened that they will not have staff on the ground in the future.”

Pa Chamroeun, president of the Cambodian Institute for Democracy, said Sweden’s decision to move the embassy reflected poorly on the Cambodian government, which had failed to respect human rights and the democratic process.

He said Sweden had likely not seen any improvements in the country’s track record despite providing aid for governance and democracy-building activities.

“So, it sends a message that is not a good image for Cambodia on the international stage,” he said.

Details: https://cambojanews.com/sweden-moves-diplomatic-mission-following-termination-of-bilateral-aid/?fbclid=IwAR2xeiMMj7bkOidACft0-VNBZl9sYiMc4Oe_Hc5nzQ6F4hnhtJDjFTyYkTE