Sixty-seven civil society organizations and rights groups renewed a call to the Cambodian government to immediately stop its attacks against political activists, human rights defenders, journalists and dissenting voices, as groups marked a quieter-than-usual International Human Rights Day on Thursday.

A number of civil society organizations and rights groups celebrated the day with online forums and discussions on pressing issues, and through the release of a joint statement. The statement was critical of the removal of Human Rights Day as a holiday, which, the groups said, was symbolic of the government's unwillingness to cease the repression of human rights in the country.
“2020 has also borne witness to significant assaults on the fundamental freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association, and Cambodia has garnered global attention due to a government crackdown on activists, human rights defenders and public-facing dissenting voices for exercising their fundamental freedoms,” the statement reads.

According to the statement, over 120 individuals have been arrested this year for exercising their fundamental freedoms.

This is the first year December 10 is not a national holiday after the government did away with six public holidays last year to increase the number of annual work days. The government also prevented groups from conducting on-ground events on Thursday because health officials are rushing to get ahead of a new COVID-19 cluster that has recorded 39 cases so far.

Chak Sopheap, executive director at the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, spoke at a small gathering of activists and said that while the government may have signed international treaties that required it to uphold human rights norms, she had seen no improvements in the last 15 years.

“Actually, [human rights] exists only on paper. We have observed that in recent years, the human rights abuses in Cambodia is a grave concern, human rights activists and the [government’s] opponents are under threat,” she said.

Am Sam Ath, deputy director of monitoring at local rights group Licadho, said that the civil society organizations had seen a sharp increase in rights violations in the last three years.

Sam Ath is referring to a government crackdown that started in 2017 and resulted in the dissolving of the opposition party, targeting of rights activists and groups and the shuttering or harassment of independent news organizations.

“When we talk about human rights, we talk about political rights. We also see space for NGOs is narrowing because some activities are banned,” he said.
“We are accused of being the opposition and inciters who encourage people to go protest on land grabbing issues,” he said.

Chin Malin, deputy president of the Cambodian Human Rights Committee, denied any accusations that the government was repressing the rights of Cambodian citizens.

“Their message is nothing new,” he said, referring to rights groups. “We don’t know if it is their habit or someone else is preparing them to do this.”

Malin said, for example, any demands made by rights groups for the court to drop or release people charged with a crime was against the Constitution because the court was an independent institution.

Rights groups have frequently asked the government, which has a hold over the courts, to drop charges and release people, they say, are wrongfully charged for political reasons.

Seng Sary, an independent analyst from the Cambodia Institute for Democracy, said mechanisms within the ASEAN framework would not improve the rights situation, nor would China, which as a policy delinks trade and investment in Cambodia from democracy and human rights.

“Only the U.S.-EU and UN mechanism could bring Cambodia to the democratic path and respect for human rights,” he said. “And we hope that the U.S. government under [President-elect] Joe Biden will make a change and promote democracy and human rights around the world.”

Details: https://cambojanews.com/ngos-call-for-release-of-jailed-activists-on-muted-human-rights-day/?fbclid=IwAR3NaVwdvzUELyWNpxQF2nl6vXR1eQZpxiA0wifmMQM-JnmCW5f5ewFreww