As nations around the world marked Human Rights Day on Thursday, the wives of detained opposition officials in Cambodia said authorities have repeatedly used harassment and physical violence to infringe on their constitutional right to hold peaceful protests calling for the release of their husbands.

Last year, more than 2,000 people gathered in Phnom Penh’s Freedom Park on Dec. 10 at an event celebrating human rights, where civil society organizations marked Human Rights Day by calling on the government to drastically improve Cambodia’s rights record to avoid the loss of crucial tariff-free access to the European Union under a preferential trade scheme.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on Dec. 10, 1948. Cambodia ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other key U.N. rights instruments in the early 1990s, but few have taken root during Prime Minister Hun Sen’s 35-year-rule.
The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) expressed concern last December over moves by authorities to hinder celebrations, as well as the government’s decision to remove Human Rights Day as a public holiday in the country beginning in 2020.

A year later, the EU has suspended tariff-free access to its market under the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme for around one-fifth of Cambodia’s exports, citing rollbacks on democracy and human rights, while the country’s rights record has worsened, by all accounts.

Cambodia also faces the threat of sanctions from Western nations over similar actions, including the September 2017 arrest of opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) chief Kem Sokha over an alleged plot to overthrow the government with U.S. help and the banning of his party by the Supreme Court two months later for its supposed role in the scheme.

The move to dissolve the CNRP marked the beginning of a wider crackdown by Hun Sen on the political opposition, NGOs, and the independent media that paved the way for his ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) to win all 125 seats in the country’s July 2018 general election.

On Thursday, 67 Cambodian civil society organizations issued a joint statement urging the government to respect the democratic principles and human rights enshrined in the UDHR and the country’s constitution. They also called for an immediate end to the targeting of activists, rights campaigners, journalists, and CNRP supporters, and the unconditionally release all of those arbitrarily detained.

The groups said that the end to Human Rights Day as a public holiday in Cambodia "is symbolic of the [government's] unwillingness to promote human rights, and coincides with the increasing repression of human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democracy in Cambodia."

They noted that more than 120 individuals have been arrested so far in 2020 "for exercising their fundamental freedoms," while the year saw "a surge in the use of force by the authorities against peaceful protestors, which was reported in at least 15 instances"—an increase of nearly double that of a year ago. Youth activists and women human rights defenders "bore the brunt" of these acts, they said.

Kata Orn, spokesman for the government's Cambodia Human Rights Committee (CHRC), said Human Rights Day had been called off this year due to the coronavirus pandemic. He dismissed the joint statement by civil society organizations, saying Cambodian enjoy their freedoms without any restrictions.

Kata Orn also alleged that individuals have broken the law and abused the rights of others, which led to their legal issues.
“So far, a few NGOs and some politicians raised issues about a group of people and politicians who are in trouble with the law,” he said. "Instead of referring to the group, they said that human rights are declining throughout the country. This isn't true."

In recent months, the “Friday Wives,” as they are increasingly referred to, have held weekly demonstrations in the capital, despite the threat of police violence, demanding the freedom of their husbands—more than a dozen members of the CNRP who have mostly been jailed on “incitement” charges after expressing views critical of Hun Sen’s leadership.

‘Things have changed’

Seng Chanthorn, the 49-year-old wife of former CNRP councilor for Kampong Thom province Sun Thun, suffered internal injuries in September when security personnel violently dispersed one such protest in front of the Phnom Penh Municipal Court, slamming her onto a paved street and knocking her unconscious.

But despite the incident, she has vowed to continue her fight for her husband’s release, saying he had played an integral role in her family’s financial security and happiness before his imprisonment several months ago.

“I am medically unwell, yet I am obliged to feed my family in the absence of my husband,” she told RFA’s Khmer Service.

“Our family used to have a reasonable income before my husband was incarcerated. Things have changed.”

Seng Chanthorn said that her four children have been unable to concentrate on their studies because of the trauma they experienced when their father was arrested and his continued absence.

“Sometimes, they want to drop out of school and find a job to help support the family and look after me,” she said.

Additionally, she said, Sun Thun’s arrest has shaken her family’s life in other, more sinister ways.

“We have been threatened and placed under surveillance,” she said.

“My children have been deprived of their freedom. Wherever they go, they are followed by the authorities. We live in constant fear of reprisal and intimidation now.”
A family targeted
Seng Chanthan was born to a poor peasant family in Treal commune, in Kampong Thom’s Taing Kauk district. In 1991, she married Sun Thun, a teacher, and now makes a living selling food at a local school.

Sun Thun volunteered with the Cambodian Center for Human Rights in Kampong Thom’s Baray district from 2003 to 2008 and served as the provincial head of the Cambodian Independent Teachers Association for around seven years. In addition to teaching, he was elected provincial councilor of the Kampong Thom for the CNRP, serving nearly two terms until the party’s dissolution in 2017.

Seng Chanthan said that her husband has faced constant government persecution throughout his career, regularly getting transferred to new schools located more than 10 kilometers (six miles) away from his home, and often being accused of teaching politics to his students.

At one point, she said, district education officials told him that if he didn’t apply for a moratorium on his political activities, he would be moved to a school as far as 40 kilometers (25 miles) away. In June 2019, he was abducted by unidentified men and severely beaten before being released—an incident she believes was an intimidation tactic by the ruling party.

According to Seng Chanthan, before his arrest, Sun Thun was regularly approached by a “man in a luxury car” who tried to persuade him on a monthly basis to give up politics or join the CPP “in exchange for a rank and fortune,” but he refused.
On June 1, Kampong Thom provincial authorities arrested Sun Thun at his home. No warrant was produced, and he was not even allowed to dress before being sent directly to Prey Sar Prison in Phnom Penh, where he was charged with “conspiracy,” “incitement to commit crimes,” and “incitement to disobey soldiers.”

**Politically motivated cases**

Several other CNRP activists—including more than 40 monks, youths, and civil society officials—have been arrested and imprisoned in 2020 on similar charges, while nearly 20 others have been assaulted by masked men in the street and none of the perpetrators have been brought to justice.

Hun Sen claims that the arrested opposition members are linked to a plot to overthrow his government, while government and ruling party spokesmen describe the peaceful protests of the activists’ wives as a “service” to members of the opposition living in exile, who they often term “illegal rebels,” and say aim to turn the international community against Cambodia.

Notably, the number of arrests has grown significantly since the EU partially withdrew tariff-free access to its markets under the EBA scheme in August.

Seng Chanthan told RFA she believes her husband’s case is politically motivated, saying he has only worked to help people.

“It is the most unjust thing for him because he never betrayed the nation or incited the people to cause chaos, as he is accused of,” she said.

“My husband is a good person. He is much-loved by everyone and the people respect him. He cares about our social issues. Where there is oppression, he is always there, offering help. This accusation is a serious threat to my family.”
‘Fight for justice’

Seng Chanthan said she has no plan to end her peaceful protests in front of the Phnom Penh Municipal Court and other institutions, despite being obstructed and mistreated by the authorities.

“I am a weak woman, but in my heart, I am strong,” she said, adding that she is not afraid of what security personnel might do to her.

“They should be ashamed of themselves for being that unjust. Cambodia should not be a land of injustice,” she said.

“My husband is an inspiration for me. He gives me the strength to fight for him. I will continue to protest, even if I am abused, insulted, pushed, or knocked to the ground. I shall continue my fight for justice. Nothing can stop me.”

Authorities had vowed to take disciplinary action against the officer who assaulted Seng Chanthan but have yet to do so in the nearly three months since the incident. A lawsuit she filed against the officer has yet to be heard by the court. Meanwhile, authorities continue to accuse the “Friday Wives” of carrying out “illegal” protests.

“I have little hope in the courts, but I have the will to continue my fight,” she said. “Where there is a will, there is always a way.”