A local rights group has linked the upcoming closure of a United Nations-administered refugee centre in Phnom Penh to the visit of a high-ranking Vietnamese delegation to Cambodia last month.

The site, in Sen Sok district, now houses about 76 refugees and asylum seekers from Vietnam – members of highland ethnic minorities that rights groups say face ethnic and religious persecution by the Vietnamese government.

On November 29, the government wrote to the local office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to inform the agency that it would close the site on January 1.

The letter called on UNHCR to speed the resettlement of 62 registered Montagnard refugees at the site, but said any unregistered asylum seekers – officials say there are “more than 10” – would be deported to Vietnam upon the centre’s closure.

In a statement yesterday, the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights said the decision to close the Sen Sok site on January 1 was “further evidence that the treatment of political refugees in Cambodia is secondary to the [government’s] political and economic prerogatives”.

CCHR compared the case to the government’s forcible deportation of 20 ethnic Uighur asylum seekers to China in December last year, which it linked to the prior announcement of a US$1.2 billion Chinese aid-and-loans package.

Similarly, it added, “the decision to close the centre and to repatriate the Montagnards comes a month after Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung led a high-ranking delegation to Cambodia”. Dung made a three-day visit to Cambodia on November 14.

CCHR called on the government to refrain from putting human lives in peril “in exchange for political capital and financial gain”.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Koy Kuong rejected the claim. “No one has influence on Cambodia’s policy. We decided to close it down on our own,” he said.

Also yesterday, Interior Ministry spokesman Khieu Sopheak said the centre was being shuttered because there was little hope UNHCR could staunch the flow of Montagnard asylum seekers from Vietnam.

“They should resolve it in Vietnam, but they are just doing it here to get the money,” he said. “If we allow them to keep the site open until UNHCR has grand children, they still won’t resolve the matter.”

Khieu Sopheak said UNHCR has requested a three-month extension in order to process the resettlement of the 62 approved refugees at the site, but repeated that unregistered people would be deported.
“For those who have not been interviewed or granted asylum, we have immigration laws,” he said. “They have to be repatriated to the place where they came from.”

Kitty McKinsey, UNHCR’s Asia spokeswoman, did not comment in detail on the government’s reason for closing the centre, except to say that the agency was “simply trying to find solutions for 62 people”.

Andrew Swan, a programme manager for the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation, said last year’s Uighur deportation showed how “fickle” Phnom Penh was to outside pressure. He added that there was “no clear reason” why an extension should not be granted to UNHCR.

Since 2001, around 2,000 Montagnards have fled to Cambodia due to official crackdowns inside Vietnam. Human Rights Watch said on Tuesday that around 300 Montagnards are currently serving jail terms for their religious or political beliefs.