Dear Editor,

I write to outline my serious concerns arising from an article published recently in The Phnom Penh Post on the involvement of police and military police in a land conflict in Stung Trang district, Kampong Cham (‘Police employ guns and batons to drive villagers from disputed land’, August 10).

Stung Trang district deputy police chief Chear Thearirth confirmed that a private company involved in the land conflict with local villagers “hired” police and military police to intervene to clear the impugned land, leading to clashes with villagers and injuries to two elderly women and a young man.

This incident reflects a dangerous trend in Cambodia, whereby police and armed forces are increasingly working in the interests and under the apparent direction of private individuals and businesses.

On February 22, the Post published a leaked Royal Government of Cambodia document, signed by Prime Minister Hun Sen, which lists individual units of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces together with private individuals or companies that are reported to be providing donations to those units. Since the publication of that document, a land dispute in Omlaing commune, Kampong Speu, between villagers and a company owned by the ruling Cambodian People’s Party Senator Ly Yong Phat, has highlighted the likely results of these donations. Battalion 313, which according to the leaked document is funded by Ly Yong Phat, violently intervened on behalf of his company to clear the impugned land.

The growing trend of private control over the police and armed forces poses a very serious threat to stability in Cambodia. The creation of bands of armed men answerable to powerful individuals or companies raises the spectre of violent clashes between different groups operating in defence or furtherance of conflicting private interests.

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights urges the RGC to intervene immediately and publicly to stop the dangerous co-opting of the police and armed forces by private individuals and businesses, and to curb the serious threat to stability that is posed by such practices.

Ou Virak, President
Cambodian Center for Human Rights