# **Informal Sector Workers Plead** For Relief as New Coronavirus **Outbreak Batters Cambodia**



Students wearing face-masks sit on a motor-taxi's back seat as they head to a school in Phnom Penh, Nov. 2, 2020.

Workers in Cambodia's informal sector, who have yet to receive any assistance amid restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, called for relief from the government Monday, as authorities grappled with a rising caseload from an outbreak in the country last week.

The workers—who include but are not limited to construction workers, women in the entertainment industry, casino employees, and moto-taxi drivers—said they are desperate and need of help from the government as the latest infections suggest there is no end in sight to the spread of the virus that has led to financial devastation in Cambodia.

A woman from the entertainment sector who gave her name as Bopha told RFA's Khmer Service that she lost her job to the pandemic in early 2020 and has been unable to find work since. As a single mother, she said she cannot earn enough money to buy food, pay her rent and loans, and feed her children.

"Life is so hard—I sometimes have to wash dishes for people or clean their houses just to get some money for rent," she said.

"I want the government to help us. Whatever assistance it can provide will be appreciated. We are desperate."

Another worker at a restaurant at the NagaWorld Casino in Phnom Penh, Nop Tithboravy, told RFA that his job—like many others at the casino—had been suspended because of the virus.

"But we still have to pay the rent, for water, garbage services, and the bank, all while feeding our families," he said.

"This is so difficult. We would like the banks, in particular, to understand our situation, but they are unwilling to listen.'

Chem Pisith, a tuk-tuk driver, told RFA that life was much harder a month after a Nov. 3 event when several people became infected after a Hungarian delegation visited Cambodia.

He said people are terrified and rarely go out, which has left him barely earning U.S. \$2.50 a day in recent weeks when he used to earn

Chem Pisith urged the government to work with the country's banks to ease interest rates on loans until the pandemic is over.

"Everything is so desperate and helpless now-even my customers complain that they are in very bad financial situations," he said.

"Yesterday, I didn't make even a single dollar for the whole day. Without government help, we will die."

Cambodia's latest outbreak began on Nov. 28 and has so far led to 32 people testing positive for COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. The government has since ordered the re-closure of karaoke bars, schools, and businesses.

Ou Tephalin, president of the Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation, joined with nine other NGOs recently to launch a 10-day online campaign called "Dealing With COVID-19 by Leaving no One

She told RFA that the campaign is meant to make the voices of the suffering heard by the government, which earlier this year vowed to "leave no one behind or to die of starvation" as a result of the pandemic.

"It is very sad that informal sector workers have been left out of the government's social relief efforts," she said.

Chhim Sithar, the leader of a union for NagaWorld workers, told RFA

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that the casino had "made a fortune" during the crisis, but had failed to step up for its employees, despite a lack of government assistance.

"The proceeds appear to benefit only foreigners who are shareholders of the company," he said.

"They bring their earned money back their countries while Cambodians remain poor and desperate. The government also ignores our suffering."

Vorn Pov, president of the Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA), told RFA that while life is already hard, the government has stepped up restrictions on the freedom of expression, leaving those impacted with few channels to convey their grievances.

"Informal sector workers are in an awfully bad shape because the government has set a priority for the garment factory workers," he said, referring to Cambodia's key export industry and largest employer.

"They don't help us [in the informal sector]. And on top of that, they deprive us of our rights and freedom of expression."

#### 'File complaints

Government spokesperson Phay Siphan said plenty has been done to help the general population, especially the poor.

Regarding informal workers, he suggested that they file complaints with the banks.

"The government cannot do much other than ask the banks for leniency for those who owe them money," he said.

"The banks have agreed to help people during this crisis. If people are not happy with how the banks treat them, they can file complaints before the courts."

The Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation's Ou Tephalin, who has unsuccessfully filed petitions calling for assistance with several government institutions, including the Ministry of Labor, and even King Norodom Sihamoni, said she was troubled by Phay Siphan's comments.

"People are in dire straits financially and desperate, but he suggests filing complaints with the courts," she said.

"How on earth could that help when people cannot even afford to buy food, let alone paying for court fees? I think what the government is doing is flouting its responsibility to its own people."

Reported by RFA's Khmer Service. Translated by Nareth Muong. Written in English by Joshua Lipes.

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