

Cambodian Opposition Activist's Wife Hospitalized After Authorities Disperse Protest

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Fellow CNRP activists' wives help Seng Chanthorn after security personnel slammed her to the ground in Phnom Penh, Sept. 4, 2020.

RFA

The wife of an activist with Cambodia's banned opposition party was severely injured Friday and several other women were roughed up when security personnel violently dispersed their protest of their husbands' pre-trial detention in the capital Phnom Penh, according to one of the women.

Seng Chanthorn, the wife of Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) activist Sun Thun, was admitted to the hospital after authorities from the city's Prampi Makara district threw her to the street, causing her to pass out, as they broke up the wives' weekly "Black Friday" campaign in front of the Phnom Penh Municipal Court, fellow CNRP wife Prum Chantha told RFA's Khmer Service.

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After undergoing an examination, doctors determined that Seng Chanthorn had suffered “internal injuries” during the crackdown, said Prum Chantha, who took part in the protest peacefully demanding the release of the 17 CNRP activists from Prey Sar Prison.

A video of the assault was published to Facebook later on Friday, which purportedly shows a security guard slamming a woman onto a paved street, after which she appears to faint.

Prum Chantha told RFA that the security personnel “intended to kill” her and the other CNRP wives to “put a stop to further protests.”

“It was extremely brutal—we are weaker and unarmed women, but they pushed us around like animals,” she said.

“They dragged and hauled us. I am very sad that Khmers would assault their own kind like this.”

According to Prum Chantha, in addition to Seng Chanthorn’s serious injuries, four other women also suffered scrapes and bruises when security guards broke up the protest.

Phnom Penh Municipal Police spokesman Seng Sokseiha told RFA that both the protesters and security guards “pushed one another” and denied that the guards had violently assaulted any of the CNRP wives, despite the video of the alleged assault.

He said the women had held an “illegal protest,” without elaborating.

“The authorities must protect [the court],” he said. “Protesters displaying banners must first seek consent from the Phnom Penh authorities.”

In past years, protesters in Cambodia’s capital—particularly activists demonstrating over land disputes—have been given relatively free rein to air their grievances, in some cases even being permitted to hold gatherings demanding justice outside of the home of Prime Minister Hun Sen.

However, after the CNRP received more than 3 million votes—accounting for nearly half of the country’s registered voters—and narrowly lost Cambodia’s 2013 general election to Hun Sen’s ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), protesters took to the streets amid allegations of voter fraud, prompting more restrictive regulations in the name of maintaining public order.

‘Inappropriate force’

Ny Sokha, head of the human rights unit for Cambodian rights group Adhoc, told RFA that Friday’s protest was “peaceful,” legal, and complied with the country’s constitution. The actions of the security guards, however, constituted a “human rights violation,” he said.

“What we have observed is that the guards used inappropriate force to crack down on the protesters,” Ny Sokha said.

“I believe their intention was to intimidate the protesters, in contravention of the law. Their actions had nothing to do with protecting security, peace, and social order.”

The CNRP was disbanded by Cambodia’s Supreme Court in November

2017 for its alleged role in a plot to overthrow the government.

The move to ban the CNRP was part of a wider crackdown by Hun Sen on the political opposition, NGOs, and the independent media that paved the way for the CPP to win all 125 seats in parliament in the country's July 2018 general election.

After being dispersed from in front of the Phnom Penh Municipal Court on Friday, the CNRP wives petitioned the German Embassy to intervene in their husband cases.

NGO raids

Also, on Friday, authorities in the capital carried out a second day of raids on the offices of local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) under the pretext of examining their registration compliance, according to Vorn Pov, president of the Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA).

Vorn Pov told RFA that authorities in Meanchey district visited his NGO's office and informed him they will return to "register and record our staff, including foreign staff, and examine the organizational structure" on Sept. 10.

He said he had already submitted his NGO's registration to the Ministry of Interior, as required by law, and that he is under no requirement to submit a report to local authorities, adding that police had already conducted an inspection of his organization last year.

"This [new] inspection, without any consent from the Ministry of Interior, is against the law and amounts to a threat [against NGOs]," he said.

Meanchey District Police Security Section Chief Phin Phal told RFA the inspection will "allow authorities to easily manage" NGOs and is necessary to "register their location" within the district's jurisdiction.

'Another threat'

Friday's raid came a day after Ouk Chhayavy, president of the Cambodian Independent Teachers Association (CITA), said local police carried out a search of her office, claiming they were "conducting a census" and demanding information about the group's registration and activities.

She called the move "yet another threat against the CITA" over its repeated calls for the release from detention of the group's former leader and current president of the Cambodian Confederation of Unions (CCU) Rong Chhun. The union leader was arrested on July 31 and charged with "incitement" after he criticized the government's handling of a border dispute with Vietnam, prompting near daily protests by supporters.

Ouk Chhayavy said she will continue her campaign to demand social justice, despite police intimidation.

"I appeal to all teachers not to worry because what we have done is legitimate," she said.

"We should stand up to carry out good deeds and not allow ourselves

to be defeated by threats. Our struggle will succeed.”

Adhoc spokesman Soeung Sengkaruna told RFA that laws regulating NGOs don't require inspections, calling the actions by authorities “illegal and a threat to NGO staff.”

***Reported by RFA's Khmer Service. Translated by Samean Yun.
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