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Authorities nix NGO census

NATIONAL

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Reporter : Orm
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Representatives of about six institutions of unions, federations, associations and NGOs sent a letter to the Minister of Interior after learning that local authorities would compile statistics on their Cambodian and foreign staff. In response, authorities said they would not proceed with the staff census.

Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC) president Ath Thorn told The Post on Wednesday that in Phnom Penh, the Meanchey district authorities had sent a letter to his union requesting permission to participate in conducting a staff census in which all union employees must have photographs confirming their position, identification documents and residence permit documents.

Thorn claimed that such actions seem to put pressure on unions because lately, activists have been arrested.

“Union leaders, as well as most employees, often participate in social activities in advocacy, so if they are identified, they would clearly be a target. It is difficult to find anything else, so it makes our staff and management scared because now it happens too easily [getting arrested],” Thorn said.

Centre for Alliance of Labour and Human Rights (Central) programme coordinator Khun Tharo said the local authority’s staff census was a form of intimidation and against the law.

“This is contrary to the principles of the law on trade unions, the principles of the law on non-governmental organisations and the principles of the International Labour Organisation [ILO] core convention,” he said.

Cambodian Youth Network (CYN) president UI Vann said the authorities’ census was related to interference in the organisation of independent associations in the field of human rights and labour rights, which is prohibited by the ILO’s core conventions.

He added that the information being demanded by the authorities is already in a report which the civil society organisations have submitted to the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training.

“Why did the local authorities in Meanchey district send a letter requesting a census only from unions and NGOs working in the field of human rights and advocacy for the promotion of democracy and the protection of nature, of which there are about four to five institutions, while other institutions did not receive a letter?” Vann asked.

Vann added that the letter was unreasonable and inaccurate because those institutions as well as other NGOs were already up-to-date with the relevant ministries.

“We observe that there are no legal requirements that say we must update local officials, especially the district authorities. Therefore, we see it as a restriction on the freedom of association to carry out its activities in the current context,” he said

Meanchey district police chief Meng Vimeandara told The Post on Wednesday that the census had nothing to do with intentionally intimidating unions and NGOs. The authorities wanted to know about those organisations and unions. It is like conducting a census of the population, he said.

Authorities will not gather the statistics at the organisations unless they agree. If the unions and NGOs do not agree, the authorities will not carry out the census.

“Doing it like this, it’s not like enforcing a warrant, it’s just in terms of asking for cooperation with local authorities, there’s nothing serious. We have decided to eliminate this plan to gather statistics of union and NGO staffs,” he said.

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