

10 September 2020

Cambodia: Three human rights defenders of Khmer Thavarak arrested

On 6 and 7 September 2020, three human rights defenders and members of **Khmer Thavarak**, Koet Saray, Tha Lavy and Eng Malai were arrested by police in Phnom Penh, for planning to take part in a peaceful demonstration to ask for the release of several imprisoned human rights defenders. The three defenders have since been appeared in court, charged with “incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest” and moved to Phnom Penh Correctional Centres (CC) 1 and 2.

[Khmer Thavarak](#) is a youth group that was set up in early 2020. The movement advocates against social injustices and raises concerns about pressing environmental issues in Cambodia. They have been at the forefront of raising human rights concerns in the country, and have also been reaching out to large audiences through their social media platforms to educate and raise awareness on various social issues.

On 6 September 2020, Phnom Penh police arrested human rights defender and Buddhist monk, Koet Saray over his plans to participate in a peaceful assembly that was to take place on 7 September 2020 at the Freedom Park in Phnom Penh. The demonstration was to call for the release of [imprisoned](#) human rights defender [Rong Chhun](#), and to call for the release of [imprisoned](#) members of Khmer Thavarak, [Hun Vannak](#) and [Chhoeun Daravy](#). Koet Saray was presented before the Phnom Penh court on the same day, where he was charged with “incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest” and later sent to pre-trial detention in Phnom Penh’s CC 1.

The following day, on 7 September 2020, two other members of Khmer Thavarak were arrested by Phnom Penh police. Human rights defender Tha Lavy was arrested while exiting a tuk-tuk at the Freedom Park, while he was on his way to the demonstration. Woman human rights defender, Eng Malai was arrested on the same evening, after leaving the local Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Phnom Penh. On 8 September 2020, both defenders were presented before the Phnom Penh Court, where they were charged with “incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest” and sent to pre-trial detention, Eng Malai in CC2, and Tha Lavy in CC1.

These events closely follow the [arrest](#) of three environmental rights defenders, Long Kunthea, Phoung Keorasmeay and Thun Ratha of [Mother Nature Cambodia](#), who were also charged with incitement, for planning to organise a one-woman march to the Prime Minister’s residence to raise awareness about the filling in the Boeung Tamok lake.

Following the initial arrest on Monday, the Ministry of Interior released a statement accusing Khmer Thavarak of inciting instability and disrupting security and public order, and appealed to the public to not participate in any of the youth movement’s ‘illegal’ activities. The Ministry called for legal

action to be taken against members of the group, leading to the multiple arrests in the following days.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the progressively hostile environment for human rights defenders in Cambodia. Front Line Defenders condemns the arrest of human rights defenders, Koet Saray, Tha Lavy and woman human rights defender, Eng Malai, as it believes they are being targeted for their legitimate and peaceful work for the protection of human rights.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Cambodia to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Koet Saray, Tha Lavy and Eng Malai and drop the charges against them, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being targeted solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Ensure that the treatment of Koet Saray, Tha Lavy and Eng Malai, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the 'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Cambodia are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals, and free of all restrictions including police and judicial harassment.

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