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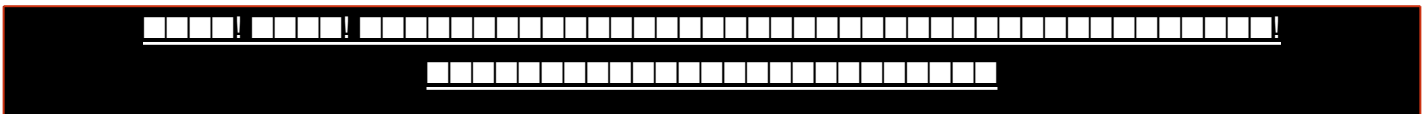
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Press Release

[Authorities Conduct Mass Detention of Forest Activists in Phnom Penh](#)

Joint Organizations

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August 18, 2011 - CCHR, CLEC and LICADHO condemn today's mass detention of peaceful activists in Phnom Penh, in which police detained over 100 villagers for distributing environmental fliers.

The activists, who mostly hail from Cambodia's Prey Lang forest, gathered in 14 provinces and Phnom Penh to raise awareness over deforestation and economic land concessions that have been granted inside the forest. The Prey Lang network maintains that the preservation of Prey Lang is critical to the preservation of wildlife habitat and flora that is sacred to indigenous communities. They also claim that deforestation would contribute to climate change and ultimately affect their livelihoods.

Approximately 300 Prey Lang members gathered in front of the Royal Palace to conduct a religious ceremony early on Thursday morning. The network members then dispersed in small groups throughout the city to distribute fliers advocating for the preservation of the forest. Police and local officials immediately descended on each of the locations, confiscated the leaflets and detained participants in local commune offices for questioning and "re-education."

Police said the demonstrators were stopped because they had not given notice to the authorities prior to the distribution, and that the distribution could "disrupt social order." Furthermore, the police claimed it was the act of distributing the fliers, rather than the contents of the fliers themselves, that could disrupt social order. However, throughout Phnom Penh, businesses distribute fliers - without the need of authorization - on a daily basis.

"Once again we see the phrase 'disruption of social order' being used to justify cracking down on freedom of expression," said Ou Virak, President of CCHR. "The real threat here is to the elite's ability to exploit Cambodia's natural resources. And the real threat to social order is the disregard for the homeland and livelihood of hundreds of ordinary citizens."

At least 106 people were detained, including four at the Srah Chork sangkat office, 22 at the Boeung Salang sangkat office, 24 at the Boeung Keng Kang 3 sangkat office, 18 at the Chatamuk sangkat office, 11 at the Phsar Damkor sangkat office, and 27 at the Tonle Bassac sangkat office.

Prey Lang forest is situated in parts of Preah Vihear, Kampong Thom, Stung Treng and Kratie provinces. Cambodian authorities have identified the area as an important for conservation, but it remains officially unprotected. In recent years, economic land concessions granted to private companies have encroached on the area.

"The Prey Lang network and its members have a right to gather peacefully and share their concerns," said Naly Pilorge, Director of LICADHO. "This is a fundamental part of democracy. The mass detentions were a totally disproportional and shocking response to what were relatively minor and subdued gatherings."

This is not the first time that authorities have cracked down on the Prey Lang communities. In February 2011, communities claim that two companies began logging on their land so that they could plant rubber trees. Community members approached the worksite and were met by groups of armed police, military police, soldiers and forestry administration officers. The authorities surrounded them and prevented them from moving, even preventing them from getting water from streams. The forces also fired their weapons. The group was stranded without food and water for three days. Finally the communities returned home, but armed forces followed and took note of those who had participated in the protest.

Prey Lang network then came to Phnom Penh on May 25, 2011, for a demonstration at the Freedom Park. That protest proceeded without incident.

"This same group had demonstrated before - on the same issues - in Phnom Penh," said Yeng Virak, Executive Director of CLEC. Today's claim by the authorities that their activities could disrupt social order is an excuse to avoid addressing the national problem of Prey Lang."

In recent weeks, authorities have interfered with at least one other group of citizens for distributing leaflets on issues of public concern. On July 23, a group of garment workers distributed fliers highlighting burgeoning inflation rates and calling for lower prices for food and other staples. Four workers were arrested for taking part in the distribution.

CCHR, CLEC and LICADHO calls upon Phnom Penh authorities to cease arresting and detaining Cambodian citizens who distribute informational fliers on legitimate issues of public concern. The government must listen to the Cambodian people on the frontline of issues such as deforestation, rather than silencing them.

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