

Joint statement

Conviction of Mother Nature Activists is a National Shame

04 July 2024

The Phnom Penh Capital Court's conviction and sentencing of 10 Mother Nature activists to 6-8 years in prison, and the arrest of five of them on 2 July 2024, is a shame for our nation. Silencing environmental defenders and characterising their peaceful advocacy as a threat to the state is a mockery of justice.

It is well past time for authorities to listen to and work with youth and environmental activists. Stop spending resources harassing, threatening and prosecuting the brave and passionate young people who are working to protect Cambodia's most precious natural resources.

Four activists —Thun Ratha, 32; Ly Chandaravuth, 24; Long Kunthea, 26; and Phuon Keoraksmeay, 23 — were gathered alongside supporters and family outside the court as the verdict was read out. A group of at least 50 police rapidly swarmed them, violently dragging and shoving them into waiting cars. At least two of them were dragged by their necks. At no point did the four activists resist arrest. At no stage did they pose a threat to the state or its security forces. The violent and aggressive manner of their arrests is unacceptable.

It is unknown when exactly Yim Leanghy, a 35-year-old Mother Nature activist who was convicted but not present outside the court, was arrested and transferred to prison. Amid the scuffle, the police also took Eng Sokha, an activist who is not related to this case, into custody but she was later released.

The government's unjust decision to arbitrarily scatter the five activists to different prisons across the country, far from their homes, will only add to the suffering faced by the activists and their families. According to official information, Leanghy is in Kampong Speu, Thun Ratha was transferred Correctional Center 3 in Tbong Khmum, Daravuth is imprisoned in Kandal, Keoraksmeay is in Pursat provincial prison and Kunthea is being held in Preah Vihear. This unprecedented move, so transparently aimed at breaking the spirits of the activists, also places a heavy burden on their families who will have to travel hundreds of kilometres to visit their loved ones or provide essential materials in under-resourced prisons.

The decision to imprison Thun Ratha at Correctional Center 3 goes against detention policies laid out in a Ministry of Interior prakas issued in 2022. Additionally, the detention of all five activists across the country is a violation of international standards on the humane treatment of prisoners.

For development partners who profess to care about Cambodia's environment: now is the time to raise your voice and call for the immediate release of these activists. Any failure to address the convictions amounts to complicity in these abuses. No amount of greenwashing will remove the moral stain of your continuing silence.

The convicted Mother Nature activists include the five named above as well as Sun Ratha, Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson, Binh Piseth, Rai Raksa, and Pork Khoeuy. All 10 were convicted of plotting against the state under Article 453 of the Criminal Code, in a case stemming from a decade of environmental advocacy work done by Mother Nature from 2012 to 2021. Each received a sentence of 6 years in prison for the plotting conviction, while Sun Ratha, Leanghy and Gonzalez-Davidson were sentenced to a total of 8 years and were fined 10 million riel (around \$2,500) after also being convicted for insulting the king under Article 437 (bis).

The court also permanently banned Gonzalez-Davidson from entering Cambodia after serving his sentence. The Spanish national was deported from the country in 2015, and was tried in absentia with no option to defend himself in court.

The targeting of Mother Nature has spanned almost a decade and yet Cambodia's environmental activists refuse to be silenced. Thun Ratha, Kunthea and Keoraksmeay were convicted of incitement in May 2021 for organising a one-woman march to advocate against the filling-in of a Phnom Penh lake. Their convictions

were upheld by the Phnom Penh Appeal Court and subsequently by the Supreme Court, but their sentences were partially suspended. Although they were allowed to leave prison, they were placed under restrictive probation conditions.

This reliance on trumped-up charges to malign Mother Nature's activities as attacks against the state reflects a failure to understand that jailing environmental and youth advocates only harms the country's future. We should be honouring these activists, not imprisoning them.

Among their activities, Mother Nature activists have advocated for the cancellation of land privatisation in Kirirom National Park, the protection of forests in Kampong Speu's Bokor Mountain that is being cleared for a satellite city project, and for Battambang authorities to prevent the polluting of the Sangkae river with plastic waste. The portrayal of these activities and peaceful work as a form of plotting, combined with the leveraging of the lèse-majesté provision, is just another example of the sustained attacks faced by civil society groups and frontline activists and deprives all Cambodians the opportunity to freely and safely defend our human rights and the environment without fear of retribution.

We, the undersigned, call on the authorities to immediately overturn all convictions against the Mother Nature activists, ensure their release without conditions, and stop the relentless persecution of environmental and human rights activists in the country.

The following groups endorsed this statement:

1. 185K Thida Chambork Forestry Community (Kampong Chhnang)
2. 197 Land Community (Koh Kong)
3. AmLeang Community (Kampong Speu)
4. Boeung Pram Community (Battambang)
5. Boeung Pi community(Battambang)
6. Bos Snor Community (Tbong Khmum)
7. Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU)
8. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
9. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
10. Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
11. Cambodian Human Rights Action Coalition (CHRAC)
12. Cambodian Tourism Workers Union Federation (CTWUF)
13. Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL)
14. Chi Kha Kraom Land Community (Koh Kong)
15. Chher Pech Changvar Laor Chhert Community (Kampong Chhnang)
16. Community to Protect Nature (Pursat)
17. Dak Por Community (Kampong Speu)
18. Equitable Cambodia (EC)
19. Federation of Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC)
20. Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC)
21. Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
22. Khmer Student Intelligent League Association (KSILA)
23. Kbal Kla Forestry Community (Kampong Thom)
24. Klahaan Organization
25. Klaing Toek 78 Community (Siem Reap)
26. Kouy Indigenous Community in Ngan commune (Kampong Thom)
27. Kouy Indigenous Community in Prame Commune (Preah Vihear)
28. Land Community (Pailin)

29. Labour Right Supported Union Khmer Employee of Nagaworld (LRSU)
30. Lor Peang Community (Kampong Chhnang)
31. Mean Chey Land Community (Svay Rieng)
32. Mother Nature Movement (MNM)
33. Ou Bat Moan Community (Oddar Meanchey)
34. Partnership for Environment and Development (PED Cambodia)
35. Phnom Krom Community (Siem Reap)
36. Phum Seila Khmer Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)
37. Pongrok Chey Leak community (Kampot)
38. Prey Lang Community Network
39. Rattanak Rokha Forestry Community (Oddar Meanchey)
40. Reaksmei Sameakki Community (Kampong Speu)
41. Samaki Chek Meas Community (Svay Rieng)
42. Samaki Sangkae Pir Mean Rith (Preah Vihear)
43. Sahmakum Teang Tnaut Organisation (STT)
44. Sre Ampel Water Fall Tourism Forestry Community (Kampong Chhnang)
45. Srae Prang Land Community (Tboung Khmum)
46. Stueng Khsach Sa Forestry Resource (Kampong Chhnang)
47. Ta Ni Land Community (Siem Reap)
48. Thnaot Chum Land Community (Pursat)
49. Tonlung Community (Tboung Khmum)
50. The Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW (NGO-CEDAW)
51. Trapeang Chan Forestry Community (Kampong Chhnang)
52. Trapeang Chour Community (Kampong Speu)
53. Youth Resources Development Program (YRDP)