

Environment Ministry Should Stop Arresting and Harassing Forestry Activists

February 9, 2021 – We, the undersigned groups, urge the Ministry of Environment to stop their campaign of harassment against local forestry activists and community members. On Friday morning, local officials working for the Ministry of Environment arrested five forestry activists who were wrapping trees in Buddhist cloth and collecting evidence of widespread illegal logging occurring inside Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary.

The five were detained without charge for three nights in the Kratie provincial police station and environmental department office before being released on Monday morning. The activists were released only after thumb-printing a contract ordering them not to undertake further conservation activities inside the protected area, or to share footage, photos or information with other organisations, without permission from authorities.

This is not the first time some of these activists have been detained. When taken together with the ministry's previous crackdown on community-based events to protect the Prey Lang forest last year, we have serious concerns that some of the ministry's actions against grassroots activists are not only failing to protect the country's remaining forests, but in fact harming conservation efforts, particularly in the Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary.

The arrested activists, one of whom was Ouch Leng, a Goldman Environmental Prize winner, were detained on Friday inside the wildlife sanctuary in Kratie province. The items seized from the five by authorities as "evidence" include posters that say "Help protect our forest", cameras, GPS devices, and memory cards that the activists said contain evidence of illegal logging.

These items are clearly not indicative of any crime. In fact, they show that the five environmental activists – Ouch Leng, Heng Sros, Men Mat, Heng Run, and Torng Cheang – were working to protect the increasingly endangered Prey Lang forest and document evidence of criminal logging in the area.

The Ministry of Environment accused the individuals of "entering the protected area without permission". This accusation has no basis in Cambodian law. A blanket denial of entry into protected areas only exists for specifically designated "core zones", which Prey Lang does not have. Sadly, this is not the first time the ministry has detained forestry activists for simply being inside this wildlife sanctuary.

In February last year, ministry officials stopped hundreds of monks, community members and environmental activists from the Prey Lang Community Network from entering the forest for an annual tree-blessing ceremony – once again claiming that they were not allowed to enter the protected area. A month later, local officials detained four forestry activists – including Leng and Mat – who were investigating reports of illegal logging in Prey Lang. These arrests occurred after the men were beaten by security guards working for Think Biotech, a company with a 34,000-hectare concession that is contiguous with the Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary and has been accused of illegal logging inside the protected area by local community members.

Illegal logging in protected areas is a rampant problem in Cambodia, and we desperately need many different individuals and organisations – including the Ministry of Environment, international and local civil society organisations, and community-based organisations – to work freely and independently in order to protect our remaining forests.

We are disappointed that the ministry has instead engaged in a campaign of harassment against some of the country's most prominent forestry activists. Taken together, these actions, as well as recently reported plans to construct a power transmission line and accompanying access road through the heart of Prey Lang, deeply concern us.

Prey Lang is a designated "protected area" under Cambodian law. The five arrested activists, like all of us, only want to see the wildlife sanctuary live up to its "protected" designation. We call on the Ministry of Environment to cease their harassment of activists, and respect the rights of all parties who wish to see Prey Lang conserved and protected for many years to come.

Signed,

1. 197 Land Community (Koh Kong)
2. Activities for Environment Community (AEC)
3. Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT)
4. Affiliated Network for Social Accountability (ANSA)
5. Am Leang Community (Kampong Speu)
6. Andong Trabek Land Community (Svay Rieng)
7. Boeung Pram Community (Battambang)
8. Building Community Voices (BCV)
9. Bos Snor Community (Tbong Khmum)
10. Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU)
11. Cambodia Development People Life Association (CDPLA)
12. Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation (CFSWF)
13. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
14. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
15. Cambodia's Independent Civil Servants Association (CICA)
16. Coalition for Integrity and Social Accountability (CISA)
17. Cambodian Independent Teachers' Association (CITA)
18. Cambodian Informal Economy Workers Association (CIWA)
19. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
20. Cambodian Labor Confederation (CLC)
21. Cambodian Tourism Workers Union Federation (CTWUF)
22. Cambodian Tourism and Service Workers Federation (CTSWF)
23. Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
24. Cambodia Youth and Monk Network (CYMN)
25. CamASEAN Youth's Future (CamASEAN)
26. Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL)
27. Chek Meas Land Community (Svay Rieng)
28. Chi Kha Kraom Land Community (Koh Kong)
29. Chi Kha Leu Land Community (Koh Kong)
30. Chray Indigenous Community (Ratanakiri)
31. Coalition of Cambodian Farmers Community Association (CCFC)
32. Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (C. CAWDU)
33. Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL)

34. Community Peace-Building Network (CPN)
35. Community to Protect Nature (Pursat)
36. Dak Por Community (Kampong Speu)
37. Equitable Cambodia (EC)
38. Gender and Development Cambodia (GADC)
39. Haong Samnam Community (Kampong Speu)
40. Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
41. Indigenous Community in Prame Commune Community (Preah Vihear)
42. Independent Trade Union Federation (INTUFE)
43. Khmer Kampuchea Krom For Human Rights and Development Association (KKKHRDA)
44. Kleang Tuek 78 Community (Siem Reap)
45. Koh Sralao Fishery Community (Koh Kong)
46. Kouy Indigenous Community (Preah Vihear)
47. Labour Right Supported Union Khmer Employee of Nagaworld (L.R.S.U)
48. Land Community (Pailin)
49. Lor Peang Land Community (Kampong Chhnang)
50. Mean Chey Land Community (Svay Rieng)
51. Mother Nature Cambodia (MNC)
52. Not 1 More (N1M)
53. Ou Vor Preng Community (Battambang)
54. Peace Bridges Organization (PBO)
55. People Center for Development and Peace (PDP)
56. Phum Phsar Kandal Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)
57. Phum Sela Khmer Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)
58. Phnom Krom Community (Siem Reap)
59. Ponlok Khmer (PKH)
60. Prek Ksach Land Community (Koh Kong)
61. Prey Chher Pich Changva Laor Chhert Community (Kampong Chhnang)
62. Prey Lang Community (Kampong Thom)
63. Prey Peay Fishery Community (Kampot)
64. Raksmeay Samaki Community (Kampong Speu)
65. Rattanak Rokha Forestry Community (Oddar Meanchey)
66. Rural Cambodia Technological Support Organisation (RCTSO)
67. Samaki Romeas Haek Community (Svay Rieng)
68. Samaki Sangkae Pi Mean Rith (Preah Vihear)
69. Steung Khsach Sor Forestry Resource (Kampong Chhnang)
70. Ta Noun Land Community (Koh Kong)
71. The Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW (NGO-CEDAW)
72. Thmar Da Community (Pursat)
73. Trapeang Chour Community (Kampong Speu)
74. Transparency International Cambodia (TI)