

Pressure on freedom of expression continues amid climate of fear

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Following the arrests of **Mr Mam Sonando** and **Mr Rong Chhun** and the issuing of warrants for 3 other members of *the Cambodian Watchdog Council (CWC)*, the Royal Government of Cambodia has continued its actions of silencing civil society and the monarchy in the wake of the signing of the **Supplemental Document on the 1985 Border Treaty with Vietnam**.

Mr Mam Sonando was arrested on 11 October 2005 for defamation with further charges of incitement and disinformation being laid while he was in detention. **Mr Rong Chhun** was arrested on 15 October 2005, charged with defamation and incitement.

On 19 October 2005 a request for the extradition of **Mr Ea Channa**, deputy secretary general of *the Student Movement for Democracy (SMD)*, and **Mr Men Nath**, president of *the Cambodian Independent Civil Servants Association (CICA)* was made by the Royal Cambodian Government (RCG) to the Royal Thai Government. Both men were believed to have sought asylum in Thailand after warrants for their arrest were issued together with Mr Rong Chhun and Chea Mony, following their joint statement against the Border Treaty.

On the same day, a defamation charge was lodged against **Prince Sisowath Thomico**, cousin of **retired King Norodom Sihanouk's** in response to statements issued by the Prince denouncing the signing of the Border Treaty. The Prince flew to China the day before the charge was lodged in the Phnom Penh Municipal Court.

While Mr Mam Sonando was permitted to finally see his lawyer five days after his arrest and detention in Prey Sar Prison, he was additionally charged on 27 October with incitement of others to commit a criminal offence and broadcasting false information. Finally in the Appeal Court on 3 November, Mr Mam Sonando was denied bail after Judge Saly Theara rejected promises by Mr Mam Sonando that he would not flee the country or interrupt investigations. Mr Mam Sonando has said he will lodge a final appeal to the Supreme Court.

Mr Rong Chhun has also been denied bail at the Phnom Penh Municipal Court and is awaiting an appeal hearing in the Appeal Court on 2 December 2005.

Consequently a climate of fear has descended over the NGO community, labor unions and civil society following the spate of arrests and warrants, with some NGO heads going so far as to travel overseas during the weeks following the arrests.

Most recently, on 21 November 2005, a summons was issued for **Mr Say Bory**, an advisor to retired King Sihanouk, to answer questions relating to allegedly defamatory comments made by the advisor in relation to the Border Treaty. Mr Say Bory is currently residing in France and was asked by the retired King not to return to Cambodia.

Both the National Assembly (11 November) and the Senate (25 November) have adopted the Border Treaty, with King Norodom Sihamoni, signing and ratifying the Border Treaty on 30 November 2005.

LICADHO again strongly urges the Royal Government to drop all criminal charges relating to the Border Treaty and to pursue defamation action through the appropriate civil courts or in a public forum. LICADHO believes that such a sensitive issue as national borders should be discussed and debated openly in a public forum.

As an active member of the newly formed coalition of human rights, the Alliance for Freedom of Expression in Cambodia (AFEC), LICADHO is supporting the launching of a yellow ribbon campaign to raise public awareness of freedom of expression in response to the recent actions taken by the RCG against government critics. 60,000 yellow ribbons are being distributed all over the country and it is hoped that the ribbons will be worn as a sign of solidarity leading up to Human Rights Day on 10 December 2005.

Chronology of Events