

Cambodia widens crackdown on rights activists

By Ek Madra
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PHNOM PENH, Jan 4 (Reuters) -- Cambodian police arrested another human rights worker on Wednesday in a wider crackdown on opposition figures that has drawn international condemnation, in particular from Washington, activists and police said.

Pa Nguon Teang, vice-director of the U.S.-funded Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), was detained in the northeast province of Stung Treng, near the border with Laos, said CCHR spokesman Ou Virak.

Police confirmed the arrest, but did not say why he was being held.

"He was arrested at a border checkpoint under orders from the Ministry of the Interior," Stung Treng police chief Muth Mao told Reuters by telephone, but gave no details.

The centre's director, Kem Sokha, an outspoken critic of Hun Sen, Cambodia's prime minister for the past two decades, was arrested at the weekend along with a CCHR lawyer and charged with defaming the government.

The charges stem from a banner unfurled at a December human rights rally which accused Hun Sen of being a communist and a traitor who had sold Cambodian land to neighbouring Vietnam.

Kem Sokha's arrest came 10 days after opposition leader Sam Rainsy, who is in self-imposed exile after having his parliamentary immunity revoked, received an 18-month jail term in absentia, also for defamation.

Analysts and diplomats say the defamation cases are a clear example of Hun Sen's ruling Cambodian People's Party using the war-scarred southeast Asian nation's notoriously corrupt courts to silence political opposition.

"This is the latest in a series of arrests and lawsuits targeting critics of the Cambodian government and the cumulative effect of which is to call into question the Cambodian government's commitment to democracy and human rights," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said of Kem Sokha's case.

In Geneva, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour on Wednesday expressed "deep regret" at the arrest of Sokha and CCHR lawyer Yeng Vireak.

The Canadian former war crimes prosecutor reminded the government that Cambodia had signed all key international human rights treaties, including those guaranteeing freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Noting that the arrest was one of a number involving officials from

civil society, trades unions and the media, Arbour said in a statement.

"This disturbing trend threatens to undo the progress made ... over the last decade to build an open and just society based on the rule of law."

The arrests, along with last year's jailing of opposition MP Cheam Channy for seven years for defamation, led New York-based Human Rights Watch to accuse Hun Sen of mimicking the military dictatorship in nearby Myanmar, formerly Burma.

"Hun Sen appears to be following the Burmese model by imprisoning peaceful critics of his increasingly authoritarian government," said Brad Adams, Asia director of Human Rights Watch.

"The message is clear: If you criticize the government, you will be thrown in jail," Adams said.

(Additional reporting by Richard Waddington in Geneva)

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