

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Cambodia: Trade unionists released but concerns remain high

Brussels, 3 February 2006 (ICFTU OnLine) Numerous trade unionists, sympathisers, journalists and diplomats posted in the Cambodian capital paid tribute to the triumphant return to Phnom Penh on 1 February of Chea Mony, president of the Cambodian trade union centre FTUWKC, following several months of exile, first in Ireland then in France. His decision to return came with Prime Minister Hun Sen's announcement that the charges against him had been lifted, along with those brought against several trade union leaders and human rights activists who had been in detention since October 2005.

Chea Mony had been forced to flee the country following charges of libel against the Cambodian government. Mony and other Cambodian trade union leaders had been accused of incitement to crime. The charges were made following a declaration in which he had criticised the government for signing a border agreement between Cambodia and Vietnam. At the time, the ICFTU had engaged in a campaign to step up pressure on the government to drop these accusations.

Whilst welcoming these releases, the ICFTU nonetheless remains highly concerned over the deterioration in trade union rights and fundamental freedoms in Cambodia, particularly freedom of expression. It has noted, furthermore, that the Prime Minister appears to have already reneged on his promise to withdraw the charges levelled against Chea Mony and Rong Chun, president of the Teachers' Union Confederation (CITA), as well as the human rights activists freed over recent weeks. During a public ceremony on 1 April, Mr Hun Sen had proposed that these activists "either be sentenced in court, in which case he would ask the King to pardon them, or ... shut up (!)".

Among the other people recently released but being targeted once again by the prime minister are Kem Sokha, director of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, his assistant PA Nguon Teang, and Yeng Virak, a human rights activist closely involved in the training projects being carried out in the country by the International Labour Organisation. They had been arrested during a demonstration held to mark Universal Human Rights Day on 10 December. Making particularly strong representations to the Government, the ILO had underlined its commitment to freedom of expression, an indispensable condition for the free exercise of trade union rights, according to this specialised UN agency.

During a mission carried out over recent days in Cambodia, the ICFTU's Asia Pacific regional organisation (ICFTU-APRO) had impressed on the government the same concern for freedom of expression, at the same time as insisting on its desire to maintain a neutral approach to its work in Cambodia, taking care, for instance, not to take sides against any Cambodian trade union organisation, regardless of political affiliation.

In light of the situation, the ICFTU will continue to press the Cambodian authorities to ensure full respect for trade union rights. It will also continue to insist on the investigation into the murder in January 2004 of Chea Vichea, the brother of Chea Mony and his predecessor as the leader of the FTUWKC. It is widely known that the official investigation into his death and the trial that followed were a cover up.

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. The ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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