

# URGENT ACTION

## CRACKDOWN ON YOUTH ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

Six youth environmental activists have been wrongfully imprisoned in retaliation for their peaceful environmental activism. The activists are members of Mother Nature Cambodia, a well-known environmental group that campaigns against environmental destruction and related human rights abuses. In Cambodia, environmental activists face severe threats and repression from private companies and the authorities, in retaliation for protecting the environment, advocating for climate justice, and promoting the rights of Indigenous communities.

**TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER**

**Prime Minister Hun Sen**  
Office of the Prime Minister  
Jok Dimitrov Boulevard Phnom Penh,  
Cambodia  
Twitter: @PeacePalaceKH

Dear Prime Minister Hun Sen,

I am writing to express my grave concern on the ongoing crackdown on environmental activists affiliated with Mother Nature Cambodia. Six youth activists - **Long Kunthea, Phuon Keoraksmeay, Thun Ratha, Sun Ratha, Ly Chandaravuth, and Yim Leanghy** – are wrongfully imprisoned because of their peaceful environmental activism. These youths have been imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their human rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. They should be released immediately and unconditionally.

I am aware that Long Kunthea, Phuon Keoraksmeay and Thun Ratha were arrested and have been detained since September 2020, simply for announcing their plan to undertake a peaceful march to raise concerns over the planned privatization of the Boeung Tamok lake. They were later convicted under Articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code on 5 May 2021 and sentenced to between 18 to 20 months in prison.

Sun Ratha, Ly Chandaravuth and Yim Leanghy were arrested on 16 June 2021 while two of them were investigating river pollution in the Tonle Sap river. They were charged variously with “plotting” and “insulting the King”, under articles 453 and 437 (bis) of the Criminal Code, which carry maximum prison sentences of 10 years and 5 years, respectively, and sent to pre-trial detention.

All six are now being held in overcrowded prison cells in which their human rights, health and safety continue to be put at risk. Amnesty International has repeatedly raised concerns regarding overcrowding, poor conditions, and human rights abuses in Cambodian prisons. The organization has most recently raised [concerns](#) about Covid-19 outbreaks in many prisons, which are putting all prisoners at additional risk.

As you know, Cambodia is well-known for its precious natural resources including rainforests and lakes, and the preservation of these resources is vital both for the protection of the human rights of local communities, and to advance climate justice. The efforts of these brave young human rights defenders should be recognized and supported, not criminalized and punished.

**I therefore urge you, Prime Minister Hun Sen, to take all necessary measures in order to:**

- **Ensure the pardon and immediate release of Long Kunthea, Phuon Keoraksmeay, Thun Ratha, from prison and quash their convictions.**
- **Drop all charges against Sun Ratha, Ly Chandaravuth and Yim Leanghy and ensure their immediate release from prison.**
- **Pending their release, ensure that they are protected from all forms of ill-treatment and provided access to adequate healthcare.**
- **End the harassment, intimidation and persecution of Mother Nature Cambodia and all environmental activists and groups and provide adequate support and protection to those working on defending the environment in Cambodia.**

Yours sincerely,

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Long Kunthea (22), Phuon Keoraksmeay (19), and Thun Ratha (29) - have been imprisoned in Phnom Penh since their arbitrary arrest in September 2020. In May 2021, they were sentenced to between 18 and 20 months in prison for seeking to protest government plans to fill and privatize a major lake in the capital, Phnom Penh.

The three were arrested soon after publicly announcing a plan to undertake a two-person march to Prime Minister Hun Sen's house to express concerns regarding plans to privatize and develop Boeung Tamok lake, Phnom Penh's largest remaining lake.

Long Kunthea and Phuon Keoraksmeay were sentenced to 18 months in prison for "incitement to commit a felony or disturb social order" under Articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code and fined 4 million riel each (approximately \$1,000 USD). Thun Ratha was sentenced to 20 months under the same charges and also fined 4 million riel.

Sun Ratha (26), Ly Chandaravuth (22) and Yim Leanghy (32) were arrested on June 16, 2021 while two of them were investigating river pollution in the Tonle Sap river in Phnom Penh. On Monday 21 June, Phnom Penh Municipal Court Investigating Judge Im Vannak confirmed that Sun Ratha and Yim Leanghy were charged with both "plotting" and "insulting the King", under articles 453 and 437 (bis) of the Cambodian Criminal Code, which carry maximum prison sentences of 10 years and 5 years, respectively, while Ly Chandaravuth was charged with "plotting" only. Yim Leanghy and Ly Chandaravuth were sent to pre-trial detention in CC1 prison and Sun Ratha was sent to CC2 prison.

These activists are all affiliated with environmental group Mother Nature Cambodia, a prominent campaign group which has won several major environmental victories. Using a combination of community mobilization, direct action and public awareness raising, in 2015 they successfully convinced the Cambodian authorities to drop plans to build a major hydroelectric dam in Cambodia's Areng Valley, which had gravely threatened local Indigenous communities.

In 2016, their work to expose widespread environmental destruction and human rights abuses linked to the mining and export of sand from coastal areas of Cambodia led to yet another major victory – a total export ban on coastal sand announced by the Cambodian government.

Mother Nature Cambodia activists have faced a litany of repression in recent years, with many activists arbitrarily charged and imprisoned. Several of its activists have been [imprisoned](#) on baseless criminal charges of "incitement". The group has been accused of "causing chaos in society" and characterized as "illegal" by Cambodia's Ministry of Interior because it is not registered under Cambodia's notorious NGO Law.

**PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET:** [Khmer, English]

**PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL:** 25 August 2021

**NAME AND PRONOUN:** Long Kunthea (she/her), Phuon Keoraksmeay (she/her), Thun Ratha (he/him), Sun Ratha (she/her), Ly Chandaravuth (he/him), Yim Leanghy (he/him).

**And copies to:**

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