

04 September 2020

Cambodia: Three environmental rights defenders arbitrarily detained

On 3 September 2020, three human rights defenders, Thun Ratha, Long Kunthea and Phuong Keorasmey of **Mother Nature Cambodia** were arrested by Phnom Penh police. The three defenders had recently been demanding an end to exploitation of the Boeung Tamok lake, one of the last large lakes in Phnom Penh. Thun Ratha, Long Kunthea and Phuong Keorasmey will be presented before the Phnom Penh municipal court on 5 September 2020.

[Mother Nature Cambodia](#) is an environmental rights organisation that advocates and campaigns locally and internationally for the preservation, promotion and protection of Cambodia's natural environment. As part of their work, the organisation monitors and challenges gross environmental violations and also raises awareness, educates and empowers people by providing them with training and financial support. In addition, Mother Nature Cambodia also provides opportunities for environmental and human rights defenders and supports local fishermen and indigenous communities defend their rights.

On 3 September 2020, environmental rights defender Thun Ratha, and women environmental rights defenders, Long Kunthea and Phuong Keorasmey of Mother Nature Cambodia, were taken into custody separately by Phnom Penh police. Thun Ratha was picked up by police from his home while he was preparing to livestream the single person march that Long Kunthea planned from Wat Phnom to the Prime Minister's house. The purpose of this march was to seek a meeting with the Prime Minister and share concerns over pressing environmental issues including the filling in of the Boeung Tamok lake. Phuong Keorasmey was going to accompany Long Kunthea and act as a 'guest' in the Live show. However, both women defenders were also detained before they could proceed with the march. While police have not released the details of the charges the defenders are facing, they have accused the group of operating a recording studio without a permit and with distributing "false information" on Facebook.

Mother Nature Cambodia and its members have been vocal on the exploitation of the lake since the government's move in June, authorizing the Ministry of Defence to fill in around 740 acres of the lake to build a military base, which will affect over 300 families who rely on it for their livelihood. In addition to affecting the livelihood of the people, the government's existing development activities on the lake have also been eliminating crucial reservoirs for rainfall, causing severe flooding in the city during heavy rains. This authorization to the defence ministry was given despite a 2016 decree signed by the Prime Minister stating the lake as public land and by law, public land cannot be sold or leased unless they have lost their "public interest value."

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the progressively hostile environment for human rights defenders in Cambodia. Front Line Defenders condemns the arrest of Thun Ratha, Long Kunthea and Phuong Keorasmey, and the targeting of Mother Nature Cambodia, as it believes they are being targeted for their legitimate and peaceful work for the protection and preservation of environmental rights.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Cambodia to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Thun Ratha, Long Kunthea and Phuong Keorasmey, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being targeted solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of environmental rights;

2. Ensure that the treatment of Thun Ratha, Long Kunthea and Phuong Keorasmey, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the 'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;

3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Cambodia are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals, and free of all restrictions including police and judicial harassment.

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