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Technical assistance and capacity-building

Written statement* submitted by Human Rights Now, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 August 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

The Cambodian government must end its arbitrary arrests and campaign of suppression against political opposition and civil society

Hun Manet’s first year as Prime Minister has been a continuation of his father Hun Sen’s repressive legacy following his 38-year authoritarian rule as head of the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), with arbitrary arrests, harassment, and myriad restrictions inflicted upon political opponents, civil society, and journalists alike. Below are four ways that his campaign of suppression and rights violations are continuing.

1. **Suppression of Political Opposition:** The 2023 National Election was characterized by attacks on activists^[1] and election law changes which undermined true contestation.^[2] Since then, the opposition Candlelight Party—successor to the forcibly dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP)—was barred from the 2024 Senate Elections on the questionable basis that it lacked an original copy of its registration document.^[3] Further, opposition members like National Power Party’s leader Sun Chanthy^[4] and the Candlelight Party’s Vice President Thach Setha^[5] have faced incitement convictions, while the Candlelight Party’s President Teav Vannol and another Vice-President Son Chhay have both faced defamation judgments with damages upward of USD\$1 million.

2. **Suppression of Civil Society:** At least 74 people were arrested between 23 July and 18 August 2024 for legitimate and peaceful activism surrounding the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area agreement (CLV-DTA).^[6] Checkpoints were deployed throughout the country to monitor the activism, and authorities announced that protestors could face 15 to 30 years in prison on treason charges.^[7] In July 2024, ten environmental youth activists from Mother Nature were sentenced to between 6 and 8 years in prison for plotting against the government and *lèse-majesté*.^[8] Five of those activists were violently apprehended after the verdict was announced and sent to five different prisons across the country, a cruel and unusual punishment that has no precedent in Cambodia.^[9]

3. **Arbitrary Restrictions on Journalists:** In February 2023, one of Cambodia’s last independent news outlets Voice of Democracy was shut down for naming Hun Manet, and not then-Prime Minister Hun Sen, as the signatory of a foreign aid document.^[10] Further restrictions followed when the government ordered internet providers to block websites associated with certain news outlets.^[11] In December 2023, a Ministry of Information spokesperson stated that freedom of the press does not cover political content, further limiting independent journalism in Cambodia.^[12]

4. **Forced Evictions:** In the last year and a half, about 5,000 families have been evicted from areas surrounding Angkor Wat under conditions that suggest forced removals with insufficient compensation and inadequate replacement housing. ^[13] Another 5,000 are expected to be removed. Further, about 500 families are fighting for proper compensation after being displaced by the Funan Techo Canal project. This project is led by the Overseas Cambodian Investment Corporation (OCIC) which has a documented history of being behind “hundreds of evictions and numerous land disputes—many of them lasting years and some turning violent.”^[14]

5. **Recommendations:** HRN condemns the arbitrary arrests, suppression, and harassment of Cambodian dissenting voices, and we call on the Cambodian government to:

- Release all political opposition members, activists, and other civil society actors arbitrarily arrested and detained, and implement judicial reforms to ensure the protection of legal rights for all;
- Reinstate the CNRP, end all arbitrary restrictions on the political opposition, and reform electoral laws to ensure free and fair elections;

- Implement effective measures protecting people from forced evictions and ensuring that those relocated voluntarily are provided with sufficient compensation and adequate replacement housing and living conditions.

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[2] Cheang, "Cambodian lawmakers approve changes to election law that disqualify candidates who don't vote", *AP*, 23 June 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/cambodia-election-law-amendment-opposition-7c3b279d30dead4520966c64cc9ebbef>.

[3] Hutt, "Cambodia's Opposition Needs to Take a Sabbatical", *Diplomat*, 27 Feb. 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/cambodias-opposition-needs-to-take-a-sabbatical/>.

[4] Cheang, Peck, "A top Cambodian opposition politician is charged with inciting disorder for criticizing government", *AP*, 12 May 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/cambodia-opposition-sun-chanthy-8fcf91a182b20fcc86352e2f8dc9e15a>.

[5] Cheang, "Head of Cambodia's top opposition party hit with \$1.5 million judgement for defaming government", *AP*, 25 July 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/cambodia-candlelight-party-courts-teav-vannol-defamation-70b93d11e0a67b3d06703d639106932f>; RFA, "Jailed Cambodian opposition leader's final appeal denied", 9 Aug. 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/thach-setha-appeal-incitement-vietnam-video-08092024134359.html>.

[6] ADHOC, direct communication.

[7] RFA, "EXPLAINED: Why is Cambodia threatening arrests over a 3-nation economic zone?", 16 Aug. 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/vietnam-cambodia-protest-clv-development-triangle-08162024144621.html>.

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[9] LICADHO, "Mother Nature Activists Imprisoned Far From Each Other and Their Families", 3 July 2024, <https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/flashnews.php?perm=401>.

[10] Ng, "Cambodia's Hun Sen shuts down independent media outlet Voice of Democracy", 13 Feb. 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64621595>.

[11] Davin, Liblib, "Cambodian Government Blocks News Sites Before Unopposed Election", 17 July 2023, *Voice of America*, <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodian-government-blocks-news-sites-before-unopposed-election-7185151.html>.

[12] Daravady, "Official: Ministry pays close attention to freedom of press", 01 Jan. 2024, *the Phnom Penh Post*, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/official-ministry-pays-close-attention-to-freedom-of-press>.

[13] Rising, "Forced evictions or free choice? Cambodia's relocation of people from UNESCO site raises concerns", *Independent*, 11 Apr. 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/unesco-ap-cambodia-angkor-people-b2526839.html>.

[14] RFA, "Developer of controversial Cambodian canal comes with baggage", 13 Aug. 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/funan-techo-canal-ocic-08132024114400.html>.