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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.

[18 August 2025]

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

The Government of Cambodia Must End the Silencing of Civil Society Voices and the Practices of Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery

Human Rights Now (HRN) is deeply concerned by the government of Cambodia continuing its authoritarian blueprint to silence all dissenting voices by violating civil and political rights through arbitrary arrests, restrictions, threats, and harassment against civil society as well as its failures to address serious cases of human trafficking in and from Cambodia, including in the cyber scam industry. HRN calls on the government of Cambodia to cease arbitrary arrests and threats against civil society voices, release those arbitrarily detained, rescind its denaturalization law, and end practices of human trafficking and modern slavery.

1. Suppression of Civil and Political Rights

Despite the international outcry before and since the Cambodian government dissolved the main opposition CNRP party in 2017, it has continued its crackdown on civil society, including political opposition members, journalists, rights activists, union leaders, NGOs, and others. Cambodia's government has failed to make any progress on the recommendations it accepted during its fourth Universal Periodic Review by this Council in 2019, prominently including to introduce legal safeguards to protect freedom of expression and association.[1] Cambodia ranks 161st out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2025 World Press Freedom Index.[2]

Recent cases of the government targeting civil society voices include the upheld arbitrary conviction of Union leader Chea Chantha on July 31 for disseminating information about enrolment in the National Social Security Fund[3] and the arbitrary conviction in mid-July of nine Boeung Tamok villagers for land dispute protests.[4] At the start of July, five environmental activists from the NGO Mother Nature Cambodia passed the one year mark in their six to eight year arbitrary prison terms for environmental activism as they await the start of their appeals.[5] On May 16, Cambodian environmental journalist Ouk Mao was arbitrarily arrested,[6] and from May to June 2025 several political activists and opposition members were arbitrarily arrested and detained, including Keo Heang, Khou Hang Meang, Doem Kieng, and Eng Raksmeay.[7]

In March, Award winning journalist Mech Dara was arbitrary arrested following criticism of the government's role in human trafficking and cybercrime.[8] British environmental journalist Gerry Flynn was also denied re-entry to Cambodia on January 5 after assisting a documentary scrutinizing Cambodia's carbon offsetting projects,[9] occurring only a month after journalist Chhoeung Chheng was murdered after reporting on land clearings in Siem Reap.[10] Also in January, former Cambodian opposition politician Lim Kimya was shot to death in Bangkok by an ex-Thai navy officer, appearing to follow an alleged pattern of security force cooperation among Southeast Asian states to mutually suppress traveling dissidents.[11] In May 2024, president of the Nation Power Party Sun Chanthly was arrested for statements made during a short visit to Japan,[12] leading activists to call for the government of Japan to resist Cambodia's repression against activists even for statements made abroad.[13] In June 2022, 51 opposition politicians were convicted in a mass trial.[14]

2. Concerns with the Denaturalization Amendment

In wake of the recent conflict with Thailand, the Cambodian government amended its constitution to allow the government to revoke the citizenship of those who act against the national interest.[15] The risk of a new law being weaponized to arbitrarily target critics is high due to the high number of arbitrary arrests and high conviction rate for political and activism-related crimes by courts in Cambodia, which lack independence. Activists are deeply concerned that a law will target political opposition members and activists for

deportation, with those arbitrarily arrested in the past under particular risk.[16] For many of these individuals, denaturalization would leave them without national documentation and effectively stateless, compounding their vulnerability to abuse.

3. Human Trafficking

HRN is deeply concerned by widespread human trafficking in and from Cambodia. A case reported in December 2024 of sexual assault against a female Cambodian technical trainee intern working in Japan raised calls for the government of Cambodia to do more to protect Cambodian migrants from abusive recruitment by introducing a zero fee policy and strictly regulating Cambodian recruitment agencies.[17]

A June report by Amnesty similarly found that at least 53 cyber scam centers in Cambodia are staffed by trafficked and imprisoned victims, including children, working in conditions of modern slavery and regular physical and psychological abuse.[18] Victims are deceived by fake job offers and forced to conduct online scams,[19] and the UN estimates more than 100,000 imprisoned workers are in Cambodia.[20] The scam centers' revenue reportedly accounts for over 60% of Cambodia's national income, and they steal an estimated \$40 billion annually.[21] While the Cambodian government has conducted some arrests,[22] it has failed to prevent the spread of the compounds or adequately investigate credible reports of human rights violations despite victims reporting that authorities have full knowledge of their criminal operations.[23] Police have also reportedly punished trafficking victims as perpetrators, furthering their victimization.[24] At least 2,322 individuals have already been deported.[25]

4. Recommendations

HRN expresses deep concern over the Cambodian government's continuing crackdown on civil and political rights in Cambodia and failures to sufficiently protect human trafficking victims.

We call on Cambodia's government to:

- Cease the arbitrary arrests, restrictions, and threats of political opposition members, journalists, and activists;
- Release all political opposition members, journalists, human rights defenders and environmental activists arbitrarily arrested and detained, and end restrictions on freedom of expression and political parties;
- Seriously investigate cases of extrajudicial killings against political opposition members and human rights defenders and ensure accountability;
- Rescind the denaturalization amendment;
- Protect victims of modern slavery and human trafficking in and from Cambodia by ending abusive recruitment practices and ensuring accountability for all persons responsible; and
- Ensure accountability for all persons responsible for the operation of cyber scam centers, including any officials found to be illegally assisting the centers.

We call on the Council to:

- Continue to monitor and address Cambodia's rights situation;

We call on states to:

- Protest the government of Cambodia's arbitrary punishment of civil society, particularly for statements made abroad;

- Continue to pressure authorities to end arbitrary arrests, free those arbitrarily arrested, and strengthen judicial independence;
- Strengthen their assistance to independent civil society in Cambodia; and
- Strictly monitor economic cooperation and development assistance projects to Cambodia, and end any assistance that undermines human rights and democracy.

Finally, we call on states and relevant businesses to:

- Require and conduct human rights due diligence and take effective measures to end modern slavery and human trafficking in and from Cambodia throughout companies' entire value chain, and ensure that workers' rights in Cambodia are protected in accordance with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

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