

[Joint Statement] Cambodia: Cambodian Government must uphold freedom of expression, end judicial harassment against the Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights and Equitable Cambodia

We, the undersigned organisations, urge the Cambodian Government to end its reprisals and judicial harassment against the Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL) and Eang Vuthy, Executive Director of Equitable Cambodia (EC).

Silencing dissent through judicial harassment

The Cambodian Government, together with government-aligned unions, has been conducting a [coordinated smear campaign](#) against [CENTRAL](#), a leading labour rights watchdog. This is yet another example of the deteriorating human rights situation in Cambodia.

On 15th July 2024, the National Audit Authority launched an [audit](#) against CENTRAL—on the request of the Ministry of Interior—following CENTRAL’s [report](#) criticising restrictions on freedom of association among Better Factories Cambodia-registered factories. The report identified areas of improvement to help support workers avail their rights and voice their grievances. Since the launch of the report, CENTRAL has been repeatedly targeted through protests outside their offices, legal complaints against their staff, and petitions initiated by government-aligned unions to investigate CENTRAL. The initiation of this investigation is a routine tactic used by the Cambodian Government to intimidate human rights defenders (HRDs), discredit the reputation of civil society organisations, and fracture their operations.

Since 2012, [EC](#) has been a vocal proponent for communities impacted by land grabbing and the exploitation of natural resources. In 2016, Eang Vuthy also faced [judicial harassment](#). In 2017, EC was forced to [arbitrarily suspend](#) their operations for a month.

In March 2024, Eang Vuthy was charged with ‘incitement to commit a felony or disturb social security,’ which is punishable by up to two years in prison. This is a blatant attempt to stop Eang Vuthy and EC from supporting communities seeking legal remedies.

EC has also been involved in a [high-profile case](#) against the International Financial Corporation’s (IFC) predatory lending practices in Cambodia’s microfinance sector. The case is [currently under investigation](#) by the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman, IFC’s accountability mechanism. The fabricated criminal charges against Eang Vuthy alludes to the impunity which allows the government and private sector to operate large-scale ‘development’ projects without any accountability.

Cambodia’s deteriorating human rights situation

The latest cases against CENTRAL and Eang Vuthy are reflective of the worsening targeting and increasing number of judicial harassment cases against HRDS and human rights groups in Cambodia.

In July 2024, 10 HRDs associated with the environmental group Mother Nature were [convicted and sentenced](#) on baseless charges of plotting against the government and insulting the king. Similarly in 2023, NagaWorld union leader Chhim Sithar and eight members of the Labor Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld were [convicted](#) of ‘incitement to commit a felony or disturb social security.’ They were sentenced to prison for peacefully demanding higher wages and the reinstatement of union members who were unjustly fired.

In the lead up to the 2023 elections, FORUM-ASIA alongside partners [expressed grave concern](#) over the country’s descent into authoritarianism, following a blatant disregard for electoral integrity amidst escalating violence and political repression. CIVICUS rated Cambodia’s civic space as [‘repressed’](#), wherein HRDs are at risk of surveillance, intimidation, imprisonment, and death.

The government's repeated attacks on civil society sends a clear message: obey or be silenced.

The cases against CENTRAL and Eang Vuthy could set a dangerous precedent, which allows the government to openly stifle dissent. This could create an environment of fear where people eventually stop speaking out, hence paving the way to total authoritarianism.

Call to action

We call on the Cambodian Government to immediately drop the investigation and charges against CENTRAL and Eang Vuthy, in line with [Article 41](#) of the Constitution of Cambodia which guarantees freedom of expression and assembly to all.

As a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Cambodian Government needs to adhere to its principles by upholding people's right to freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention as stated in [Article 9](#).

We remind investors, international financial institutions, and donor governments of their human rights obligations, emphasising the need for them to hold the Cambodian Government accountable for the erosion of human rights and shrinking of civic space in the country.

Signatories

1. Accountability Counsel, Global
2. ALTSEAN-Burma, Thailand
3. Alyansa Tigil Mina (ATM), Philippines
4. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, Regional, Asia
5. Asia Pacific Gathering on Extractives and Human Rights, Regional (Asia)
6. Asia Pacific Network of Environmental Defenders (APNED), Asia Pacific
7. Association of Women for Awareness and Motivation (AWAM), Pakistan
8. BALAOD Mindanaw, Philippines
9. Bir Duino-Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstan
10. Bytes For All, Pakistan, Pakistan
11. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association, Cambodia
12. Centre for Human Rights and Development, Mongolia
13. Community Resource Centre, Thailand
14. Development Action for Women Network (DAWN), Philippines
15. Defence of Human Rights, Pakistan
16. Defenders in Development campaign, Global
17. Friends with Environment in Development, Uganda
18. Global Labor Justice, Washington, DC, U.S.
19. Habitat International Coalition-Housing and Land Rights Network, Middle East and North Africa
20. Humanitarian Enhancement Aid for Resilient Transformation-HEART, Bangladesh
21. Indigenous Peoples Movement for Self-Determination and Liberation (IPMSDL), Philippines/ Global
22. Indonesia Legal Aid and Human Rights Association (PBHI), Indonesia
23. Jaringan Advokasi Tambang/JATAM, Indonesia
24. KARAPATAN, Philippines
25. Kenya Human Rights Commission, Kenya
26. Korean House for International Solidarity, South Korea
27. KRuHA, Indonesia

28. Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA), Bangladesh
29. Mesa nacional para las migraciones y refugiados en rd(MENAMIRD), Republica dominicans
30. mines, minerals & People, India
31. MiningWatch Canada, Canada
32. National Fisheries Solidarity Movement , Sri Lanka
33. Natural Resource Women Platform, Liberia
34. OECD Watch network, Global (based in the Netherlands)
35. Oil Workers' Rights Protection Organization Public Union, Azerbaijan
36. Oyu Tolgoi Watch, Mongolia
37. People's Watch, Madurai, India
38. Public Association "Dignity", Kazakhstan
39. Progressive Voice
40. Reality of Aid – Asia Pacific, Philippines
41. Recourse, The Netherlands
42. Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), Bangladesh
43. SNAPAP, Algeria
44. Social Rights Advocacy Centre, Canada
45. Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), Malaysia
46. Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, Philippines
47. The Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS), Indonesia
48. The Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation, Indonesia – Jakarta
49. Think Centre, Singapore
50. TKPT Indonesia, Indonesia
51. Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, India
52. WALHI PAPUA, PAPUA
53. YLBHI, Indonesia
54. Youth for Green Communities, Uganda
55. Human Rights Now