



CCHR Human Rights Defenders Alert – Phnom Penh, 23 May 2023

Three Coalition of Cambodia Farmer Community Association’s members arrested in Kratie Province

Date of the incident: 17 May 2023
Category of HRD: Human rights activists
Location: Kratie and Ratanakiri Provinces
Nature of threat: Freedom of Association

In the early afternoon of 17 May 2023, the Kratie provincial police, acting without a warrant, stopped and took 17 members of the Coalition of Cambodia Farmer Community Association (CCFC) to a police station for interrogation. Officers also brought 32 relatives of the members to the station, including children. The group was coming back to Phnom Penh from Ratanakiri Province, where they took part in a capacity building workshop and a staff reflection meeting from 13 to 14 May 2023.

Three CCFC employees – President Mr. Theng Savoeun, Senior Organizing Officer Mr. Nhel Pheap, and Community Facilitation Officer Mr. Than Hach – were detained overnight before being sent to the Ratanakiri provincial police station for further questioning on 18 May. The other 14 CCFC members and the 32 relatives were freed and allowed to go home on 17 May. Authorities also seized computers and mobile phones used by CCFC staff members, as well as some of the organization's documents.

The three were questioned by the Ratanakiri provincial police until 20 May afternoon, after which their case was referred to a prosecutor for further proceedings. They were initially denied access to legal representation, before their lawyer was eventually allowed to be present as they were being interrogated by the prosecutor on 22 May. They were also permitted a brief meeting with family members on that day. All three were charged with plotting and incitement under articles 453, 494, and 495 of the Criminal Code and sent to pre-trial detention in Ratanakiri Provincial Prison. If found guilty, they will face up to 10 years in prison and four million riels in fines.

Meanwhile, in Phnom Penh, around 150 farmers and community members from the provinces, including Theng Savoeun’s mother, marched from the Samaki Rainsey Pagoda in Meanchey district to the Ministry of Interior to demand the release of the three men on 22 May. Ten community representatives were allowed entry into the Ministry to explain the purpose of their peaceful gathering and submit their demands. Officials asked them to wait

for a solution and to disperse in the evening. Outside the Ministry, Khan Chamkar Mon district officials, police officers in uniform, and unidentified individuals in plainclothes monitored the gathering and took pictures of participants, sometimes at close range. The demonstrators gathered again on 23 May. On the same day, the Ratanakiri provincial prison prevented the families of the detained CCFC members from seeing them, saying the three men had to undergo a mandatory 14-day COVID-19 quarantine. They were, however, allowed to leave food for their relatives.

The CCFC is a membership-based organization that was founded in January 2011 to address issues related to land rights, natural resources, and forced evictions resulting from development project affecting Cambodian farmers. Theng Savoeun was previously arrested and imprisoned alongside other NGO employees, garment factory workers, and community members in January 2014 after a violent crackdown on demonstrators in Phnom Penh. He spent five months in pre-trial detention before being convicted with a four-year suspended sentence.

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