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LICADHO

CAMBODIAN LEAGUE FOR THE PROMOTION AND DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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Media Statement

LICADHO Condemns the Arrests of La Peang Demonstrators

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LICADHO condemns the violent dispersal of more than 50 villagers from La Peang community who had begun their 60km-long peaceful march from Kampong Chhnang province to Phnom Penh, calling for a resolution to their long-standing land dispute. Amid the violent dispersal, three villagers – including the husband of the main La Peang community representative Um Sophy – were arrested and sent to the provincial court.

The peaceful march was violently broken by a large group of police and military police officers while the community was approaching the border of Kampong Chhnang and Kandal Provinces, at the Kampong Tralach district town. A total of eight villagers were injured.

The three marchers arrested are Sngoeun Nhoern (husband of prominent La Peang community leader Um Sophy), Srun Tha, and Kuch Hok (a 67-year-old elderly villager).

These latest arrests are the result of a land dispute, which dates back to 2001, when an initial 19 families had their land grabbed, which was reportedly facilitated by then village chief Thai Hie who later became a representative of the K.D.C company. K.D.C has claimed ownership of the land against the local residents in Ta Ches commune, Kampong Tralach district, Kampong Chhnang. K.D.C is owned by Mrs. Chea Kheng, wife of the Minister of Mines and Energy, Suy Sem.

The dispute has grown over the last 13 years, affecting land rights to over 100 families in La Peang village. During that time, community representatives and a local village chief were jailed for advocating on behalf of the affected villagers. A human rights worker from local organization The Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) was also found guilty of defamation on January 25, 2011.

The arrest of the three marchers today follows a violent clash between villagers and K.D.C company workers this past July, while the company was building a 2-meter high concrete wall around the disputed land. Following the incident, two villagers – Mr. Seang Heng and Mr. Mang Yav – were arrested and are currently in pre-trial detention pending trial. To this day, not a single worker from K.D.C has been arrested.

The recent violence between the villagers of La Peang and K.D.C should have sent a warning signal to authorities that a resolution for this decade-long land conflict needs to be undertaken. Instead the state continues its attempts at violently suppressing the voices of villagers and threatening the community with additional arrests.

“Clearly, this decade-long land conflict won’t go away by violently beating up the community and arresting a few more villagers,” said LICADHO Technical Coordinator Am Sam Ath. “It was said before, and now it is long overdue that the government realizes that unresolved land conflicts are a threat to Cambodia’s social stability, and have to be addressed so villagers can be given the land rights they deserve.”

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