

Authorities' Obstruction of Grassroots Activism Hurts Prey Lang Conservation

February 25, 2020 – We, the undersigned, are outraged and appalled at the restrictions placed on hundreds of community members, monks and environmental activists who were prevented by authorities from entering parts of Prey Lang protected area over the weekend. The Ministry of Environment's use of masked armed rangers to prevent members of the Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN) from conducting an annual tree-blessing ceremony in the forest is an indefensible restriction on the community's freedom of movement and harms conservation efforts in the forest.

The PLCN has proved itself to be the most effective and courageous advocate and monitor of the Prey Lang forest over the past 20 years. The group is made up of community members whose lives and livelihoods are intertwined with the forest, and they require unhindered access to the area in order to protect it. Despite the community group taking the courteous step of informing authorities of the intent to hold an annual ceremony inside the forest, officials from the Ministry of Environment blocked members from entering the forest without providing proper legal justification.

"In the past, we were able to enter the forest freely to do our activities and protect the forest," said Houen Sopheap, PLCN representative in Kampong Thom province. "But recently it has become harder and harder, and the ministry has placed more restrictions on our actions."

The Ministry of Environment wrote in a Facebook post after denying community members entry that Article 11 of the Protected Areas Law prohibits any person's entry into the protected area without permission. Article 11 refers to areas that have been zoned, and only the most protected of the four zones – the "core zone" – requires permission from the ministry prior to entry. But, years after its designation in 2016, none of the Prey Lang protected area has been zoned, despite zoning being encouraged by conservation groups due to its added protection against deforestation.

The ministry's post also referred to the Law on Associations and NGOs (LANGO), validating the exact concerns raised by more than 100 communities and civil society groups earlier this month in a statement urging the government to repeal the law in its entirety due to it being overly broad and subject to abuse. Despite past assurances from the Interior Ministry that LANGO would not be used to hinder activities of grassroots groups, the Ministry of Environment used it as a justification to prohibit the legitimate conservation activities of the PLCN. Using LANGO to prevent community members from blessing trees in a protected forest again demonstrates how harmful the legislation is in its current form.

"The use of LANGO against the Prey Lang Community Network is highly restrictive and legally inappropriate," said Am Sam Ath, deputy director of monitoring at LICADHO. "This grassroots community network must be allowed to conduct its conservation activities free from harassment and intimidation."

Lastly, the ministry accused the PLCN of using “data without appropriate scientific basis” and “documenting exaggerated reports”. The PLCN consistently produces evidence-based research showing deforestation in the Prey Lang protected area, something that should be applauded and utilised by the Ministry of Environment, not criticised or rejected.

We care deeply about Cambodia’s forests, which have rapidly disappeared over the past several decades. We know from experience that dedicated, grassroots community groups such as the PLCN are the most effective at preserving protected forests. We strongly encourage the Ministry of Environment to embrace its own call for people to protect natural resources, and to stop opposing the activities, rejecting the research and intimidating the members of the PLCN.

Signed:

1. 92 Community (Phnom Penh)
2. 197 Land Community (Koh Kong)
3. 297 Land Community (Koh Kong)
4. Angdoun Thmor Community (Preah Sihanouk)
5. Angdoun Trabek Land Community (Svay Rieng)
6. Bat Khteah Community (Preah Sihanouk)
7. Boeng Chhuk Community (Phnom Penh)
8. Boeung Pram Community (Battambang)
9. Borei Keila Community (Phnom Penh)
10. Bos Sa Am Community (Battambang)
11. Bos Snao Community (Kampong Cham)
12. Buddhism for Peace Organization (BPO)
13. C I 5 Community (Preah Sihanouk)
14. CamASEAN Youth’s Future (CamASEAN)
15. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
16. Cambodian Food and Service Workers’ Federation (CFSWF)
17. Cambodia’s Independent Civil Servants Association (CICA)
18. Cambodian Independent Teachers’ Association (CITA)
19. Cambodian Informal Economy Workers Association (CIWA)
20. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
21. Cambodian Labor Confederation (CLC)
22. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
23. Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
24. Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL)
25. Chek Meas Land Community (Svay Rieng)
26. Cheko Community (Phnom Penh)
27. Chikor Kraom Land Community (Koh Kong)
28. Chikor Leu Land Community (Koh Kong)

29. Choeung Prey Community (Kampong Cham)
30. Chorm Kravean Community (Kampong Cham)
31. Coalition of Cambodian Farmers Community Association (CCFC)
32. Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL)
33. Community Network in Action (CNA)
34. Community for Nature Protection (Pursat)
35. Dombe Community (Tbong Khmum)
36. Equitable Cambodia (EC)
37. Fishery Resource Development Community (Kampong Chhnang)
38. Forest and Biodiversity Preservation Community (Svay Rieng)
39. Forestry Community (Ratanakiri)
40. Free Trade Union of Workers of Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC)
41. Gender and Development Cambodia (GADC)
42. Green Vision Organization
43. Horng Samnom Community (Kampong Speu)
44. Independent Monk Network for Social Justice (IMNSJ)
45. Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
46. Indigenous Youth for Community Ratanakiri
47. Indigenous Youth at Brome Community (Preah Vihear)
48. Indradevi Association (IDA)
49. Kampong Samaki Community (Kampot)
50. Kean Teuk Land Community (Koh Kong)
51. Klang Teuk 78 Community (Siem Reap)
52. Koh Sdech Land Community (Koh Kong)
53. Land Community (Kampot)
54. Lor Peang Land Community (Kampong Chhnang)
55. Minority Rights Organization (MIRO)
56. Mlup Prom Vihea Thor Center (Koh Kong)
57. Meanchey Land Community (Svay Rieng)
58. Mother Nature Cambodia (MNC)
59. Natural Resource Protection Community (Kampong Chhnang)
60. Not 1 More (N1M)
61. Orm Laing Community (Kampong Spue)
62. Ou Chheu Teal Community (Preah Sihanouk)
63. Ou Tracheak Chet Community (Preah Sihanouk)
64. Ou Vor Preng Community (Battambang)
65. Peace Bridges Organization (PBO)
66. Phnom Bat Community (Phnom Penh)
67. Phnom Kram Community (Siem Reap)

68. Phnom Torteong Community (Kampot)
69. Phum Dei Chhnang Community (Kampong Speu)
70. Phsar Kandal Village Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)
71. Phum Ou Svay Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)
72. Phum Samut Kram Community (Ratanakiri)
73. Phum Sela Khmer Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)
74. Phum 22 Community (Phnom Penh)
75. Ponlok Khmer (PKH)
76. Prasak Community (Battambang)
77. Prek Ksach Land Community (Koh Kong)
78. Prek Takung Community (Phnom Penh)
79. Prek Tanou Community (Phnom Penh)
80. Prey Cheou Ou Domdek Community (Kampong Thom)
81. Prey Chher Pich Sangva Laor Chhert Community (Kampong Chhnang)
82. Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN)
83. Prey Norin Community (Battambang)
84. Prey Peay Fishery Community (Kampot)
85. Railway Community (Phnom Penh)
86. Rum Cheik Land Community (Siem Reap)
87. Rural Cambodia Technological Support Organisation (RCTSO)
88. Samaki Romeas Haek Land Community (Svay Rieng)
89. Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT)
90. Skun Land Community (Siem Reap)
91. Somros Koh Sdech Fishery Community (Koh Kong)
92. SOS International Airport Community (Phnom Penh)
93. Sre Prang Community (Kampong Cham)
94. Steung Bort village Land community (Banteay Meanchey)
95. Ta Noun Land Community (Koh Kong)
96. Tani Land Community (Siem Reap)
97. The Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW (NGO-CEDAW)
98. Thnong Land Community (Koh Kong)
99. Toul Rada Community (Phnom Penh)
100. Toul Sangke B Community (Phnom Penh)
101. Trapaing Chor Community (Kampong Speu)
102. Trapaing Sangke Community (Kampot)
103. Forestry resource conservation and development community (Kompong Chhnang)