

Cambodia: Arrests Target Critics of Regional Development Zone

Cambodian authorities have arbitrarily arrested at least 94 people since late July 2024 for publicly criticizing the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area (CLV), Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said today. At least 59 of those arrested, which include environmental, human rights and other activists, remain unlawfully detained and charged for peacefully expressing their views, including several children. The authorities should immediately drop all charges for which no internationally recognized charge is brought.

The CLV is a development plan among the governments of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam established in 2004 to facilitate cooperation on trade and migration. Concerns about the agreement resurfaced on social media in July particularly regarding land concessions and whether the CLV benefitted foreign interests above Cambodians. Many of those arrested have been charged with plotting and incitement merely for expressing their views on the CLV or organizing peaceful protests.

“The arbitrary restrictions on freedom of movement, peaceful assembly and freedom of expression are not justified under international law. The harassment of activists and their families is never acceptable. Alarming, the heavy-handed response by the Cambodian government has seen young people, including some children, unlawfully detained and charged with serious crimes against the State,” said Kate Schuetze, Deputy Regional Director for East South East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office at Amnesty International. “Cambodia’s partners should publicly and jointly call for this assault on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly to end.”

Background

Following the first arrests of three activists in July, Telegram groups with thousands of members formed and began organizing public gatherings and peaceful marches to protest the agreement. Cambodians also held demonstrations in early August in [South Korea](#), [Japan](#), and [Australia](#) about the CLV.

As public criticism grew, Cambodian authorities [tightened security measures and travel restrictions](#). Local human rights groups alleged that government officials across the country were putting land rights and civil society activists under surveillance, including ordering several not to travel outside of their communities and threatening their family members. The authorities also have imposed roadblocks on highways entering Phnom Penh and have been arbitrarily searching vans and taxis entering the capital.

Former prime minister and current Senate president Hun Sen’s [official Telegram channel](#) has aired videos of school children across Cambodia chanting in unison their support for the development agreement.

Senior officials have endorsed the crackdown through various public statements.

Hun Sen publicly called for the aforementioned [arrest and sentencing of three activists](#) in July who criticized the agreement on a broadcast on Facebook. He also threatened critics of the CLV in Cambodia as well as the families of opposition activists who live abroad with surveillance tactics that violate the right to privacy and the right to family life, stating that, “I urge the [Cambodian] government to search and find out all the groups that created this problem and live in the country. And compile all the cases of individuals outside the country, and study their family history, where their family are, if they are outside the country.”

The [National Police](#) stated on August 11 that “We are committed to making sacrifices in order to safeguard the legitimate Royal Government and implement stringent measures to prevent and suppress treacherous acts without exception, at all costs.” On August 16, the Cambodian [gendarmerie leader, Sao Sokha, also released a video of a speech](#) to his subordinates ordering them to be ready to face protesters armed with guns and to shoot if necessary.

The National Defense Ministry spokesperson, Chhum Socheat, [told CamboJA News](#) on August 12 that the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) supports the CLV and in a post on Facebook, the [RCAF High Command stated that](#) it “... will suppress and destroy all incited tactics that destroy the nation and peace, and other attempts to sabotage and overthrow the legitimate Royal Government in any form.”. Government officials from the [national](#) and [provincial](#) level, including from the armed forces, have issued a petition supporting the CLV.

Hun Sen continued to make public threats against CLV critics in [an August 12 speech](#), including against Hay Vanna, an opposition activist living in Japan: “[Y]ou all tried to incite others. ... [W]e have heard what Hay Vanna said outside of the country. ... You need to think about it carefully. If you make mistakes, you might be in danger. ... You need to think about this carefully before you travel to join the protest.”

On August 16, Cambodian authorities [arrested](#) Hay Vannith, Vanna’s brother, a Health Ministry civil servant and did not provide information about his whereabouts until August 20, raising concerns that he had been forcibly disappeared. His family only learned he was in custody after an audio recording of [a “confession” by Vannith](#) to overthrow the government was posted on August 21 on the Cambodia government spokesperson Facebook page.

The government-aligned media outlet Fresh News broadcast on August 19 [a “confession”](#) from Lach Tina, a youth activist, accusing fellow activists protesting the CLV of organizing a plot against the government.

These supposed “confessions” by detainees and claims of plots against the government heighten concerns for their safety and others in custody, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said.

Of the 94 people arrested, at least 59 have been charged and remain under arrest or in pretrial detention. Cambodian authorities have charged at least 21 people with incitement to commit a felony, a charge often spuriously brought against human rights activists. In 2021, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Cambodia [expressed concern](#) about the improper use of incitement charges. Incitement carries a penalty of up to two years in prison, while “plotting” carries a punishment of up to 10 years.

At least 33 people face charges of plotting against the state, including [four young adult members](#) from the Khmer Student Intelligent League Association. This charge was recently brought against members of the [environmental group Mother Nature](#), after which the UN Human Rights Office spokesperson, Thameen Al-Kheetan, “call[ed] on Cambodia to hold broad-based public consultations to amend relevant articles of the Cambodian Criminal Code to bring them into conformity with international human rights law.” At least four children have also been charged with plotting, punishable by up to five years in prison, rather than 10, because they are children.

All four children charged remain in pretrial detention. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Cambodia ratified in 1992, states that the arrest and detention of a child should be used only as a last resort and for the shortest period of time. The convention also upholds the rights of children to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

“The mass arrests of CLV Development Triangle Area activists are a deliberate, coordinated effort by Cambodian authorities to intimidate critics and prevent them from demonstrating in Phnom Penh or sharing their views on social media,” said [Bryony Lau](#), deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “These wrongful detentions and charges show Prime Minister Hun Manet’s disrespect for the rights of Cambodians and the country’s international human rights obligations.”

