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Cambodia: Stop disrupting civil society events and restricting freedom of expression and assembly ahead of ASEAN Summit

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, strongly urge the Cambodian authorities to immediately end the ongoing intimidation, threats and harassment of organizers, venue owners and participants involved in civil society events in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh ahead of the 21st Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit and the 7th East Asia Summit. We strongly urge the Cambodian authorities to respect the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and assembly in accordance with their constitutional and international obligations, in particular in view of rising concern that it will heighten its crackdown on these fundamental freedoms ahead of the two summits.

Since 12 November 2012, civil society groups from Cambodia and throughout the ASEAN region have converged in Phnom Penh for a series of workshops and other activities, held under the banner of two main civil society events: the ASEAN Grassroots People's Assembly (AGPA) and the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum (ACSC/APF), both timed to coincide with the upcoming ASEAN Summit from 18 to 20 November 2012.

On 13 November 2012, the opening ceremony of AGPA, which was held at a restaurant and attended by over 1,500 people, was disrupted when electricity supply to the venue was cut off. The restaurant owner had apparently been pressured by the local authorities to cancel the event. Venues for some AGPA workshops scheduled to begin on 14 November 2012 were also cancelled at the last minute, despite agreements, rental deposits and other necessary requirements being in place. In addition, over 250 AGPA participants have also been turned away by some guesthouses in Phnom Penh, ostensibly due to threats by local authorities who have been seen harassing owners of several guesthouses where these participants are staying.

Furthermore, notification by the organizers to hold a rally 16 November 2012 to submit demands to the Cambodian government as the Chair of ASEAN was refused by the Phnom Penh Municipality and Ministry of Interior. The government has also warned that the authorities would arrest anybody who participates in public protests during the ASEAN Summit.

The other civil society-organized event, the ACSC/APF, scheduled to be held on 14-16 November, also faced similar obstructions by the authorities. The organizers of this event have had their venues cancelled on two successive occasions following pressure from local authorities.

This is not the first time that the Cambodian authorities have employed harassment and intimidation tactics to disrupt ASEAN civil society-organized events on a mass scale. Earlier this year, several workshops at the ACSC/APF in March, held to coincide with the 20th ASEAN Summit, were also stopped by the authorities.

As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Cambodian government is legally obliged to respect the right to freedoms of expression and assembly, which are also enshrined in the Cambodian's Constitution.

We strongly urge the Cambodian government to immediately halt all forms of action that restrict and disrupt any of the events organized by civil society, including peaceful public assemblies, in the run up to the ASEAN Summit, consistent with Cambodia's international legal obligations. Continued

efforts to restrict and disrupt any of these events in the coming days will not only seriously worsen the already dismal human rights record of the Cambodian government, but also make a mockery of Cambodia's commitment, as an ASEAN member state, to "promote a people-orientated ASEAN in which all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in, and benefit from, the process of ASEAN integration and community building", as enshrined in the ASEAN Charter.

Endorsed by:

1. Acehnese Civil Society Task Force (ACSTF)
2. ALTSEAN-Burma
3. Amnesty International
4. Anjanee
5. Arus Pelangi
6. ASEAN Watch, Thailand
7. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
8. ASEAN LGBTIQ Caucus
9. Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)
10. Asosiasi Kewirausahaan Sosial Indonesia (AKSI)
11. Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)
12. Amnesty International
13. ASEAN Disability Forum (ADF)
14. Bank Information Centre (BIC)
15. Burma Partnership (BP)
16. Cambodian Food and Service Workers Federation (CFSWF)
17. The Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
18. The Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
19. The Cambodia Youth Indigenous Association (CIYA)
20. Coalition to Abolish Modern-day Slavery in Asia (CAMSA)
21. Community Legal Education Centre
22. Community Management Centre (CMC)
23. DEMA Malaysia
24. ELSAM Papua
25. Equitable Cambodia
26. Focus on the Global South
27. FONGTIL - The NGO Forum of Timor-Leste
28. Forum LGBTIQ Indonesia
29. FOR SOGI (Thailand)
30. Foundation for Education and Development (FED)
31. Generation Wave
32. Her Lounge
33. Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF)
34. Human Rights Defenders and Promoters (HRDP)
35. Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) / Women & Child Rights Project (WCRP)
36. Human Rights Watch
37. IMPARSIAL – The Indonesian Human Rights Monitor
38. Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
39. The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC)
40. Indigenous Peoples Task Force (IPTF)
41. Indonesia for Humans
42. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
43. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)