

JOINT STATEMENT

Authorities must immediately stop using violence and arbitrary application of laws against peaceful women strikers

Phnom Penh, 24 February 2022 - We, the undersigned civil society groups, are dismayed by recent incidents of state-sponsored violence, including sexual harassment, against Cambodian women engaged in peaceful strikes and assemblies. Members of the Labor Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld (LRSU) – most of whom are women – have been subjected to violence, imprisonment, and arbitrary application of COVID-19 measures in response to their peaceful strike since December 2021.

Authorities have repeatedly pushed, dragged and carried peaceful strikers onto buses to take them to a COVID-19 quarantine centre in Prek Phnov district, Phnom Penh this week. On 22 February 2022, a male officer grabbed and squeezed the breast of one woman as she was being forced onto a bus. Similarly, on 29 December 2021, state authorities used vulgar sexual language toward a striker and threatened to sexually assault her.

Women strikers have been repeatedly and disproportionately targeted by government efforts to disperse the peaceful strike. During January, strikers were arbitrarily denied access to bathrooms nearby the strike site, which were reopened daily as strikers returned home. Authorities have prevented strikers from returning home until after dark on multiple occasions, and at times followed them when they have been permitted to leave.

This month, strikers have repeatedly complied with orders to undertake multiple COVID-19 tests and fulfilled quarantine orders. Despite meeting such demands, on 21 February 2022, 64 strikers – 56 women and eight men – were forcibly taken to a quarantine facility as they attempted to resume their strike and were only permitted to return home late in the evening after complying with further COVID-19 testing. The next day, 39 strikers – 31 women and eight men – were forcibly taken to the same quarantine centre. Strikers reported that the facility does not have adequate access to water for bathing or drinking or adequate sleeping areas. The following afternoon, 51 additional strikers – 41 women and 10 men – were sent to the same quarantine centre. They have each been fined up to 2 million riel (US\$500) for allegedly violating COVID-19 measures as they attempted to resume their strike. Strikers detained since Tuesday have not been released from the quarantine centre.

Meanwhile, 11 LRSU members and leaders, including seven women, have been arrested since December 2021, in retaliation for their peaceful and legitimate exercise of freedom of assembly and freedom of association. They are currently in pre-trial detention. The seven women have been charged with incitement to commit a felony under Cambodia's Criminal Code and face up to two years in overcrowded prisons if convicted.

State-sanctioned violence against women, arbitrary enforcement of COVID-19 mitigation measures, and the use of the judiciary to stifle public participation are unjustified and unlawful under both international and domestic law. In particular, they violate the constitutional right to peaceful assembly and rights under the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as interpreted in the CEDAW General Recommendations Nos. 30 (regarding women in conflict, "including protracted and low-intensity civil strife, political strife") and 35 (regarding gender-based violence).

Women's rights violations continue to be rampant in Cambodia, with many women reporting feeling less free than men to exercise their fundamental rights, including their rights to speech and assembly. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a particularly heavy toll on women in Cambodia: many have suffered its economic impacts – since the most affected industries, including entertainment, garment, and hospitality, employ a larger share of women than other sectors. In these challenging times, women need increased guarantees to exercise their rights and support, and civil society cannot remain silent in the face of the violence committed against them, all the more when such abuses are committed by the very authorities whose mission is to protect them.

We remind the RGC of its commitments to CEDAW and the Committee's recommendation in paragraph 9 from November 2019 to fully guarantee the rights of women human rights defenders, trade union leaders, land and environmental activists and members of the political opposition party, particularly their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association, without harassment, surveillance or other undue restrictions. We strongly urge the government to adopt standards on gender-responsive policing and to mandate gender trainings for police,

military, and other security acting on behalf of the state so that they conduct themselves in a professional, ethical, and gender-responsive and sensitive manner whenever they interact with members of the public. We call for all women to be free to resume their peaceful strikes and exercise their fundamental rights without discrimination, and for all imprisoned unionists to be immediately and unconditionally released with all charges dropped.

This joint statement endorsed by:

1. ActionAid Cambodia (AAC)
2. Association to Support Vulnerable Women (ASVW)
3. Banteay Srei (BS)
4. Building Community Voices (BCV)
5. Cambodia Labor Confederation (CLC)
6. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
7. Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM)
8. Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation (CFSWF)
9. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
10. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
11. Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
12. Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC)
13. Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL)
14. Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC)
15. Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL)
16. Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC)
17. Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
18. Independent Trade Union Federation (INTUFE)
19. Klahaan Organization (Klahaan)
20. Neutral and Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (NICFEC)
21. Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT)
22. The Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW (NGO-CEDAW)
23. Urban Poor Women Development (UPWD)
24. Women Peace Makers (WPM)
25. Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP) Cambodia
26. 197 Land Community (Koh Kong)
27. Am Leang Community (Kampong Speu)
28. Andong Trabek Land Community (Svay Rieng)
29. Areng Indigenous Community (Koh Kong)
30. Boeung Pram Community (Battambang)
31. Bos Snor Community (Tbong Khmum)
32. Chi Kha Leu Land Community (Koh Kong)
33. Community to Protect Nature (Pursat)
34. Dak Por Community (Kampong Speu)
35. Gender and Development network (GADNet)
36. Kompres Community (Tboung Khmum)
37. Klaing Teuk 78 Community (Siem Reap)
38. Kouy Indigenous Community (Preah Vihear)
39. Land Community (Pailin)
40. Ou Vor Preng Community (Battambang)
41. Peam Ros Community (Kampong Speu)
42. Phum Sela Khmer Land Community (Banteay Meanchey)

43. Prey Lang Community (Kampong Thom)
44. Prey Peay Land Community (Kampot)
45. Reaksmei Sameakki Community (Kampong Speu)
46. Sre Ampel Water Fall Tourism Forestry Community (Kampong Chhnang)
47. Sre Prang Community (Tboung Khmum)
48. Ta Noun Land Community (Koh Kong)
49. Thmar Da Community (Pursat)
50. Tonlung Community (Tboung Khmum)
51. Trapeang Pring Community (Tboung Khmum)