

Joint Media Statement

Appeal Court Orders Release of Mam Sonando, Kan Sovann & Touch Ream

Phnom Penh (March 14, 2013) – We, the undersigned civil society groups, welcome the Court of Appeal’s long-overdue decision today to release independent radio station owner Mam Sonando and his two co-appellants, Touch Ream and Kan Sovann, but caution that a long road remains to rehabilitate Cambodia’s democracy ahead of National Assembly elections in July.

Sonando, who also heads an NGO known as the Democrats Association, was convicted in October 2012 of leading a secession plot against the Cambodian government and sentenced to 20 years. But following the Prosecutor’s odd request during the appeal hearing, the Court of Appeals today dropped the secession related charges, and convicted Sonando of illegal logging under Forestry Law article 97.6. The court also reduced his sentence to five years, with eight months – or time served – in prison and the rest suspended.

The sentences of co-defendants Kan Sovann and Touch Ream were upheld at three and five years, respectively, but the remainder of their sentences were also suspended. They have already spent 10 months in prison.

All three are expected to be released this Friday.

“We welcome the court’s decision to release Mam Sonando and his co defendants, but we cannot say that justice was truly served,” said Mr. Yeng Virak, Executive Director of Community Legal Education Center (CLEC). “They are still convicted men. The convictions are still unsupported by any evidence and the intimidation effects of this case will linger for years to come.”

Sonando was arrested on July 12 and originally charged with masterminding a so-called “secessionist movement” in Kratie. The prosecutors argued that the alleged plot originated in Kratie province’s Broma village, and that villagers had taken up arms against the authorities in an attempt to create their own nation-state. In fact, the villagers were involved in an ongoing and escalating land dispute with the company Casotim, which controls a 15,000-hectare land concession nearby.

In May, hundreds of armed government forces stormed the village and evicted hundreds of residents. A 14-year-old girl, Heng Chantha, was shot dead by government forces during the operation. Authorities have since refused to investigate Chantha’s death, calling it an accident.

“That is perhaps the greatest injustice regarding the Kratie events,” said Ms. Naly Pilorge, Director of LICADHO. “Mam Sonando and his co defendants have spent months in prison on fabricated charges, but Heng Chantha’s killer has not spent a single day in prison. The government has not even investigated the killing.”

Although Sonando was accused of masterminding the supposed secession movement in May, his arrest warrant was not issued until after he broadcast a report on June 25 from the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague, Netherlands. The report concerned a filing at the ICC by the Khmer People Power Movement that accused Cambodian government officials of crimes against humanity in relation to the country’s land conflicts.

Twenty-four hours after the ICC report first aired, the Prime Minister publicly called for Sonando’s arrest. “The political nature of this case was clear from day one, and it has only become clearer with the appeal court’s verdict,” said Mr. Pa Nguon Teang, Executive Director of CCIM.

Cambodian authorities faced intense international and domestic pressure to release Sonando after he was convicted in October. Among those calling for Sonando’s release were US President Barack Obama, former

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and French Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault. Sonando holds dual French and Cambodian citizenship.

“The release of Mam Sonando and his co defendants is an important step toward rehabilitating Cambodia’s democracy, but the international community should note that the leader of the opposition party remains in exile,” said Mr Vorn Pao, President of IDEA. “That issue looms large for the coming elections.”

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Cambodian Food and Service Worker Federation (CFSWF)
Cambodian League for the Promotion & Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
Cambodian Worker Center for Development (CWCD)
Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC)
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