

6 August 2020

## **Cambodia: Human rights defender Rong Chhun arrested and charged**

On 31 July 2020, human rights defender **Rong Chhun** was arrested at his home in Phnom Penh, which thought to be in relation to a statement he had made on the demarcation of the border between Cambodia and Vietnam that has stripped several farmers of their land. The following day, on 1 August 2020, the Phnom Penh municipal court charged the defender with “incitement to commit a felony”, and he is currently being detained at the Phnom Penh’s Correctional Center 1.

[Rong Chhun](#) is the President of the independent Cambodian Confederation of Unions and a member of the Cambodia Watchdog Council. He was the former president of the Cambodian Independent Teacher’s Association (CITA), an organisation that promotes solidarity between the private and public sector teachers, irrespective of colour, race, sex, religion or political belief. He has been a vocal human rights defender and has long raised concerns about the plight of farmer’s and worker’s rights.

On 31 July 2020, Rong Chhun was arrested without being shown an arrest warrant, at his home in Phnom Penh. The statement, although not expressly linked to the arrest but thought to have been the cause, was declared as ‘fake news’ by the authorities. On 1 August 2020, the Phnom Penh municipal court charged the defender with “incitement to commit a felony” under articles 494 and 495 of Cambodia’s penal code, and ordered he be held in pretrial detention at Phnom Penh’s Correctional Center 1.

On 20 July 2020, Rong Chhun visited Cambodia’s Tbong Khmom province, bordering Vietnam, and spoke with farmers who had been prevented from working on their land because of new border demarcations. After this visit, the defender issued a statement for Cambodia Council Watch, in which he cited irregularities with the placement of border posts and the resulting loss of hundreds of hectares of land belonging to Cambodian farmers. Soon after the statement was released, on 31 July 2020, the government’s Border Affairs Committee issued a statement rejecting Rong Chhun’s findings, accusing him of spreading fake news. The arrest of the defender soon after he published the statement is reason to believe that the two incidents are linked.

This is not the first time Rong Chhun has been arrested. The defender has been a target of judicial harassment since 2015 for his activism and work in defence of human rights. The Cambodian authorities have increasingly been targeting and silencing those who criticise them, with labour rights defenders and unions being targeted in particular.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the progressively hostile environment for human rights defenders in Cambodia. Front Line Defenders condemns the arrest of Rong Chhun and the charges against him, as it believes he is being targeted for his legitimate and peaceful work for the protection of human rights.

### **Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Cambodia to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Rong Chhun, as Front Line Defenders believes that he is being targeted solely as a result of his legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Ensure that Rong Chhun is given the right to access legal representation and family

members in line with Cambodia's national and international obligations;

3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Cambodia are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals, and free of all restrictions including police and judicial harassment.

Front Line Defenders respectfully reminds you that the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals. We would particularly draw your attention to Article 6 (c): *"Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others: To study, discuss, form and hold opinions on the observance, both in law and in practice, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and, through these and other appropriate means, to draw public attention to those matters"*, and to Article 12 (2): *"The State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration."*

Please inform us of any actions that may be taken with regard to the above case.

Yours sincerely,



Andrew Anderson

Executive Director