Cambodia: Security forces disperse peaceful opposition vigil

Sunday 22 September, 2013

Cambodia's caretaker government should publicly affirm its commitment to respecting the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, Amnesty International said, after security forces dispersed a peaceful gathering in Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh.

On the evening of 20 September 2013, more than 100 security personnel in riot gear broke up a peaceful meeting of around 30 people including monks who had gathered for a few hours at a public park around a temple, Wat Phnom, to support a hunger strike by opposition activist Prince Sisowath Thomico.

The group left without resisting the security forces, and no injuries were reported. Some of the monks were taken in a truck by military police back to their pagodas. One person was detained briefly and questioned, but later released.

"This was a peaceful assembly - it is very difficult to understand why the authorities are resorting to such a show of force, particularly at this fragile, unpredictable time," said Isabelle Arradon, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia Pacific Director.

"Although law enforcement agents have a role to play in policing assemblies, they should do so in a way which protects the right of people to peacefully express their views. Such intimidating practices by security personnel have to end."

Prince Thomico, a cousin of Cambodia's King Norodom Sihamoni and an official of the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), says he went on hunger strike on 20 September to "seek justice" following the disputed national election of 28 July 2013.

The prince announced on Facebook his intention to begin a hunger strike outside the Royal Palace on the morning of 20 September. But security forces blocked him from reaching the palace, so at around 10 a.m. he went to Wat Phnom where others joined him. The vigil was peaceful and apparently caused no disturbance.

"The Cambodian authorities should commit publicly to respecting Cambodia's Constitution and international standards around the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, and ensure that the security forces comply with these standards," said Isabelle Arradon.

"Foreign governments should as a matter of urgency demand publicly that the Cambodian authorities uphold the right to peacefully assembly."

Last night's crackdown comes five days after the shooting dead of one man and gunshot injuries to several others, when security forces used live ammunition at a clash with protesters in Phnom Penh. The clash happened at one of the many roadblocks set up in the capital ahead of the opposition CNRP's three-day mass peaceful demonstration from 15 to 17 September. The authorities have promised to conduct an investigation into the death of this man and injuries to others.

Official election results gave a narrow victory to the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), but the CNRP says the election was marred by irregularities and has vowed to boycott the opening of the National Assembly, which the King has called for 23 September.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, the holding of a peaceful assembly should not be subject to previous authorization by the authorities but, at the most, to a prior notification procedure. Further, should organizers fail to notify the authorities, the assembly should not be dissolved automatically on this basis alone, while spontaneous assemblies should be allowed.
More information:

"Cambodia: Investigate fatal shooting by security forces", Amnesty International public statement, 16 September 2013.
"Cambodia: Respect the Right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly", Amnesty International joint public statement, 5 September 2013.
"The Right to Peaceful Assembly", Amnesty International letter to the Phnom Penh Post, 27 August

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“Cambodia: Post-election tension must not lead to violence”, Amnesty International press release, 9 August 2013.

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