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Cambodia: Release of prisoner of conscience Cheam Channy

Cambodian prisoner of conscience and opposition parliamentarian Cheam Channy was released from Phnom Penh's military prison today following a pardon issued yesterday by King Norodom Sihamoni.

"We welcome the release of Cheam Channy, who was imprisoned solely for peacefully expressing his political opinions," said Brittis Edman, South East Asia researcher at Amnesty International. "We hope this marks an end to the practice of using politically motivated trials to silence political dissent."

Cheam Channy was jailed on 3 February 2005 and convicted in August 2005 of creating an illegal armed force and of fraud in a trial that fell far short of international standards of fairness. The trial was held at the Military Court, which has no jurisdiction over civilians like Cheam Channy. He was sentenced to seven years in prison. According to Amnesty International's information, there was no basis to the charges and the organisation had been campaigning for his unconditional and immediate release.

Opposition leader Sam Rainsy was also fully pardoned by the royal decree. He had been convicted *in absentia* to 18 months' imprisonment in December 2005, for defamation against government leaders. He is scheduled to return from exile very soon, possibly this week.

Government lawyers have also said publicly they would drop criminal complaints against a number of activists who had criticised Cambodia Prime Minister Hun Sen over a controversial border agreement with Viet Nam.

Background

The human rights situation in Cambodia has eroded since the formation of the current coalition government in 2004, as opposition politicians and human rights activists have been targeted in a crackdown on political dissent. The right to freedom of expression came under serious threat when several high-profile civil society leaders were detained and charged with criminal defamation and other offences for directly or indirectly criticising government policies. Amnesty International was also gravely concerned that the courts were used as a tool to silence peaceful dissent, further undermining the integrity and independence of the weak Cambodian judiciary.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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