

HRC37

Item 2 General Debate, 21 March 2018

Joint-statement on the human rights situation in Cambodia

Mr. President,

New Zealand makes this statement on behalf of a group of countries; the full version of the statement and the list of supporting delegations will be published on the extranet.

During the twenty-five years since Cambodia enshrined liberal multi-party democracy in its Constitution, the international community has supported and applauded Cambodia's progress. This included a national election in 2013, and communal elections in 2017.

As we near the elections scheduled for 29 July this year, our previous optimism has been replaced by deep concern about the recent serious decline of civil and political rights in Cambodia. These backward steps include signs of escalating repression of the political opposition, civil society and media. We share the concerns highlighted by the High Commissioner and the Special Rapporteur about actions taken by the Cambodian government that will undermine the conduct of credible, free and fair elections in July. For the Cambodian Government to retain its legitimacy, any elections must be free, fair and credible.

Contrary to Cambodia's human rights obligations and commitments, we note with particular concern that in recent months:

- There has been a significant clampdown on the press and civil society across the country, including the closure or suspension of several NGOs and independent media companies;
- The Cambodia National Rescue Party leader Kem Sokha was detained last September, and since then has been deprived of his rights including access to his lawyers, and the right to defend himself through legal assistance of his own choosing.
- The court's continued unwillingness to release Kem Sokha on bail during judicial proceedings is of concern especially in light of his deteriorating health.
- The CNRP was dissolved by the Supreme Court on 16 November, 118 CNRP members were banned from political activity for five years, and the CNRP's local and national seats were reallocated to unelected members of the ruling and other parties.

We are particularly concerned about the conditions under which opposition leader Kem Sokha is being detained following his arbitrary arrest. We call for the release of all political prisoners, including Kem Sokha.

We urge Cambodia to:

- Reinstatement of the CNRP and all elected members to their national and communal seats, and to
- Repeal the amendments to the Law on Political Parties which provided for expansive grounds for the dissolution of political parties.

An electoral process from which the main democratic opposition party has been arbitrarily excluded cannot be considered genuine or legitimate.

We call on the Royal Government of Cambodia to take all measures necessary, before it is too late, to ensure that the 2018 elections are free, fair and credible.

Further, we urge the Royal Government of Cambodia to refrain from using judicial, administrative and fiscal measures as political tools against the opposition, the media, civil society and human rights defenders. We also urge the further revision of relevant laws and amendments to the Constitution in order to enable a political environment in which opposition parties, civil society and media can carry out their legitimate roles without fear, threats, or arbitrary restrictions.

We were heartened by the UN Special Rapporteur on Cambodia's country visit that took place from 5-14 March, and strongly encourage the government of Cambodia to pay close attention to the recommendations arising from her visit. We further urge Cambodia to take all necessary measures to prevent and deter acts of intimidation and reprisals against those cooperating with the UN human rights mechanisms. We stand ready to support the implementation of assistance that will strengthen Cambodia's democratic systems.

We urge the continued attention of the international community to the current situation in Cambodia, and we will look to further consideration by the Human Rights Council if the human rights situation does not improve in the lead up to the elections in July. We encourage the High Commissioner to provide an update on the situation in Cambodia in an inter-sessional briefing ahead of the June session of the Council.

Thank you Mr. President.