



## No Greater Love – Lives on the line to protect people and the planet

May 2020

People are dying to defend the earth and the future of humanity. Global Witness's 2019 report 'Enemies of the State?' documented 164 murders of people protecting the environment or the right to land for local communities in 2018. There were 30 such murders in the Philippines, 24 in Colombia, 23 in India and 20 in Brazil. Opposing mining projects was the motivation for the murder of 43 people, 21 were murdered for standing up to agribusiness and 13 for opposing logging operations.



More recently, in November 2019 palm oil businessman Wibharry Padmoasmolo was arrested in Indonesia. He allegedly paid seven men to murder two journalists, Maraden Sianipar and Martua Siregar, who had reported on his illegal plantation.

In January 2020, Homero Gomez González and Raulo Hernández were murdered in Mexico for opposing illegal logging that threatened the habitat of the monarch butterfly.

As part of our work on climate change, the JIM cluster believes it is vital that we seek the protection of people who are standing up against environmental destruction. We will be inviting you to take action in support of such people. The following action focuses on seeing the protection of environmental defenders in Cambodia.

On 13 March 2020, security guards allegedly from the company Think Biotech took into custody Ouch Leng, director of the Cambodian Human Rights Task Force, his associate Man Mat, and Khem Soky and Srey Thei of the Prey Lang Community Network (pictured). The men had been investigating alleged illegal logging. The four environmental defenders were detained near the company's sawmill compound within the company's concession, which borders the protected area of the Prey Lang forest. The guards questioned them and did not allow them to leave or contact anyone. The guards then transported the four to another compound owned by the company. The environmental defenders were held in secret there overnight.



Witnesses alleged that the security guards physically assaulted Man Mat at the company compound, causing a bleeding head injury.

On 14 March at about 3 pm, the Cambodian police arrived at the compound. They took the four environmental defenders to the Sambor district police station, holding them overnight. On 15 March, the Kratie provincial prosecutor questioned Ouch Leng, and the next day interviewed the other three environmental defenders.

The provincial prosecutor ordered the four men released on 16 March without charges but indicated he would continue investigations into unspecified crimes they allegedly committed. Their release followed days of community protests against the arrests in the town of Kratie.

The authorities compelled the environmental defenders to hand over all documents and information from the camera, computer, phones, and memory cards they had been carrying. The prosecutor also indicated he was investigating the alleged assault against Man Mat.

The prosecutor suggested that the Cambodian Human Rights Task Force's legal status was in jeopardy and ordered Ouch Leng to submit paperwork to the Interior Ministry to clarify the organization's directorship.



In 2012, the Cambodian government granted Think Biotech a 37,000-hectare forestry concession, with the stated aim of restoring a “degraded” forest at the edge of the Prey Lang forest. However, villagers and other local observers have repeatedly accused the company of cutting down protected resin trees used by villagers and logging inside protected areas. The alleged illegal logging has led the Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN) to regularly protest against the operations of Think Biotech. The four environmental defenders had been collecting information about alleged illegal logging by Think Biotech. The authorities confiscated the evidence when they arrested the activists.

In February, the PLCN claimed the Prey Lang forest had lost 41,758 hectares, approximately 10 per cent of the forest, to deforestation between 2001 and 2018. It said that 4,536 hectares were lost in 2018 alone. Neth Pheaktra, the spokesperson for the Environment Ministry, denied the allegations, claiming the report was “polluting information,” “politically motivated,” and “untrue.”

The Prey Lang forest is home to many endangered species of animals and plants. More than 250,000 people live in and around Prey Lang, most of whom identify as Indigenous Kuy people. Prey Lang means “our forest” in the Kuy language. Indigenous peoples have sustainably relied on the forest for generations. The forest is a crucial part of the Kuy culture and spiritual life. It serves as a vital resource for Kuy people's livelihoods. Prey Lang was designated a wildlife sanctuary in 2016 and timber exports from the forest were banned.

The PLCN is supported by the Danish Christian organisation Danmission.

The conservation of the Earth's remaining rainforests is essential to mitigating the impacts of climate change. The UN Environment Programme has stated that:

*Eliminating emissions from deforestation and increasing carbon removals by promoting forest regrowth and landscape restoration could reduce global net emissions by up to 30 per cent, and over the next decade, forests could provide as much as 50 per cent of the cost-effective mitigation available.*

### What You Can Do

Write polite and respectful letters to (a letter to Cambodia will require a \$2.50 stamp):

**His Excellency Mr Rotana CHANN**

Royal Embassy of Cambodia  
5 Canterbury Crescent  
Deakin, ACT 2600

**Prime Minister Hun Sen**

Office of the Prime Minister  
Jok Dimirov Boulevard  
Phnom Penh, CAMBODIA

E-mail: [cambodianembassy@ozemail.com.au](mailto:cambodianembassy@ozemail.com.au)

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister Hun Sen

Salutation: Your Excellency

Points to make in your letters:

- Express deep concern at the recent detention of environmental defenders Ouch Leng, Man Mat, and Khem Soky and Srey Thei.
- Ask what investigation has been conducted into their detention and the assault on Man Mat by security guards from the Think Biotech corporation.
- Ask what investigations have been undertaken into evidence of illegal logging in the Prey Lang.
- Ask that the information, documents and equipment confiscated from the four men when they were detained be returned to them.
- Request the Law on Associations and Non-Government Organisations be repealed or amended. Any amendments should be directed to end its misuse to harass non-government organisations involved in defence of the environment or human rights.

**Acknowledgement:** The information for this action was drawn from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.