

Rep. Alan Lowenthal Remarks at Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing: Human Rights in Cambodia and Laos: Challenges and Opportunities

Thank you to our witnesses and thank you to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and Congressman McGovern. This briefing underscores the critical importance of the Commission.

Last Thursday we marked Human Rights Day. I introduced a resolution honoring this day and the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with the support of many of my colleagues, including Congressman McGovern. This hearing underscores how important it is that we continue the fight for human rights everywhere, for everyone.

I represent one of the largest communities of Cambodians outside Cambodia in Long Beach, California. I came to Congress in 2013 and joined the Foreign Affairs Committee. My community and I have closely watched the developments in Cambodia since the elections in 2013. Which were marked by widespread irregularities and continued the Cambodian People's Party and Hun Sen's grip on power. We were encouraged by negotiations between the ruling party and the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party.

But this year has marked a turning point for the worse. Earlier this year the law passed a law restricting non-governmental organizations. In October, two CNRP lawmakers were attacked by protestors in Phnom Penh. Finally, the leader of the opposition, Mr. Sam Rainsy, has been expelled from parliament and continues to face an arrest warrant.

Just two weeks ago I wrote a letter with Congressman Matt Salmon, the Chairman of the Asia and Pacific Subcommittee, to Prime Minister Hun Sen. We called these incidents unacceptable and we asked that all harassment of the opposition immediately cease, including by revoking the arrest warrant against Mr. Rainsy. We were pleased to have the support of many of our colleagues, again including Congressman McGovern. We cannot allow backsliding on democracy and human rights in Cambodia. We must protect the right to oppose the government and speak out.

In Laos, the situation is quite different. Much like its neighbor Vietnam, Laos is an authoritarian, one-party communist state. I have long called out Vietnam for its many human rights abuses against its own citizens.

But in Laos we hear of many of the same problems: inadequate protections for workers, including the right to organize and unionize; land grabbing, also a serious problem in Cambodia; persecution of ethnic minorities, in this case the Hmong; suppression of dissent and political prisoners—including the disappearance of Sombath Somphone, a community activist missing for 3 years.

As Laos prepares to chair ASEAN next year and the US and Laos seek greater ties, we must make sure human rights are a priority for the United States in developing this relationship. We have an opportunity here and going forward to shine a light on these often-neglected two countries.

Thank you again to our witnesses and to the Commission. Let's continue to demand democracy and human rights in Laos and Cambodia.