



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

*Co-Hosted by the Congressional Cambodia Caucus*

### **Labor and Human Rights in Cambodia**

**Wednesday, September 11, 2019**

**3:00 – 4:30 p.m.**

**2200 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon. I am Jim McGovern, Co-Chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and it is my pleasure to welcome you to this afternoon's hearing on *Labor and Human Rights in Cambodia*.

The hearing today is co-hosted by the Congressional Cambodia Caucus chaired by Congressman Alan Lowenthal – also a member of the Executive Committee of the Human Rights Commission – and Congressman Steve Chabot. We appreciate their work on Cambodia and their support in organizing the hearing, and I want to take this opportunity to thank them for their collaboration.

I also want to welcome our distinguished panel of witnesses, some of whom have traveled long distances to join us today. We thank you for the great work you do on behalf of human rights, and for being willing to share your knowledge and experience with us this afternoon.

We may be joined by other members of the Commission and the Caucus during the course of the hearing and will recognize them as they arrive.

We have quite a few speakers this afternoon, so I will be brief.

Cambodia is not a place that's constantly in the news these days – unlike a half a century ago when the country suffered through U.S. bombing campaigns, the brutal rule of the Khmer Rouge regime that killed untold numbers of its own people, and years of war with Vietnam.

It may seem like ancient history, but the legacy of that period lives on – not least in the figure of Prime Minister Hun Sen, who came to power with the Khmer Rouge, fled during an internal purge, and returned after their defeat with Vietnamese backing. Hun Sen is a direct link to the atrocities of the past and has sustained himself in power ever since.

Yet in spite of that reality, Cambodians have fought to make the most of the government structure that was set up by the Paris accords, a liberal constitutional monarchy.

In the two decades following the first United Nations-administered national elections in 1993, Cambodia saw real political and social progress, including improvements in voting processes and the development of a vibrant civil society and somewhat free print media. Opposition parties made important gains in the 2013 parliamentary elections and the 2017 local elections, and were poised to win at the national level in 2018.

But in the last few years we have seen in Cambodia what we are seeing in many other countries – formally democratic institutions that in practice are weak and corrupt and easily manipulated by authoritarian leaders. The kind of leaders who see change on the horizon and move to crush it the only way they can – by changing the rules and silencing their critics.

When we see actions like those the Cambodian state has taken since 2015 – attacking civil society leaders, closing down press outlets, dissolving the major opposition political party – we should recognize them for what they are: signs of weakness and desperation by leaders facing citizens who want to build a different, brighter future.

That brighter future that people want doesn't only depend on getting the politics right. It's also about ensuring people's economic and social well-being, ending poverty and hunger, being able to earn a decent living, and having access to housing and health care. In other words, that brighter future is as much about economic and social rights as civil and political rights.

That is why in this hearing today we are also looking at the status of labor rights in Cambodia.

Just like on the political front, Cambodia has seen some important economic progress over the last couple of decades. It's one of the fastest growing economies in the world, driven in part by the textile industry, and the official poverty rate has fallen from 48% in 2007 to 13.5% in 2014.

But rapid growth has come with high costs – like the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people by development projects, deforestation due to illegal logging and restrictions on land and labor rights – and the benefits have been uneven. We will hear today about the ongoing struggles to protect economic rights and how those interact with the problems of governance.

I want to close by highlighting one of the many cases of injustice in Cambodia. Just a few days ago two journalists who worked for Radio Free Asia, Uon Chhin and Yeang Sothearin, were tried on manufactured charges of espionage and pornography and are awaiting a verdict. If convicted, they could face prison terms of seven to 15 years.

Let me state for the record that these charges should never have been brought and should be dropped.

Thank you.