

15 September 2017

## Cambodia: Environmental rights group targeted for exposing potential sand smuggling activities

On 15 September 2017, the Ministry of Interior removed environmental rights organisation **Mother Nature Cambodia** from its registry of authorised NGOs. The decision, effective immediately, was announced two days after two members of the organisation, environmental rights defenders **Doem Kundy** and **Hun Vannak**, were charged by the Koh Kong Provincial Court on suspicion of violating privacy and incitement to commit a felony. On 12 September 2017, they were arrested as they were filming suspected sand dredging-related activities off the coast in Kiri Sakor district. Two days prior, their organisation, Mother Nature, had posted an online video highlighting potential smuggling of silica sand to Taiwan.

[Doem Kundy](#) and [Hun Vannak](#) are environmental rights defenders and members of Mother Nature Cambodia, a grassroots organisation advocating and fighting against land-grabbing and to defend environmental rights. The group has worked to expose the corruption and systematic fraud behind the extraction and export of sand in the country, along with the ensuing environmental and ecological damage.

On 15 September 2017, the Ministry of Interior announced that Mother Nature Cambodia was stricken from the official registry of NGOs, thereby revoking any documents given to the group allowing its operations in the country.

On 13 September, the Koh Kong Provincial Court charged Doem Kundy and Hun Vannak under Article 495 (incitement to commit a felony) and Article 302 (unauthorised recording of a person's image) of the Criminal Code. On 12 September 2017, around 11 am, the authorities seized Doem Kundy and Hun Vannak in their boat, near a special economic zone owned by ruling party Senator Ly Yong Phat. They were filming the activities of two suspected sand-bearing vessels anchored near Prek Khsach commune in Koh Kong province's Kiri Sakor district, suspected to belong to the LYP Group, a conglomerate company also owned by Senator Ly Yong Phat. They were taken to the Koh Kong provincial police headquarters, and interrogated before being sent to prison for the duration of the investigation. If convicted of the two charges, they could face up to two years in prison and a maximum fine of six million riel (1 250 euros).

On 11 September 2017, Mother Nature Cambodia had uploaded a [video](#) on their Facebook page highlighting discrepancies in silica sand exports figures and exposing potential large scale sand smuggling to several countries. As of 14 September 2017, the video has been viewed more than a million times on Facebook. These revelations follow previous similar scandals with sand exports to Singapore and India.

Over the past few years, several human rights defenders working on environmental issues have been judicially harassed by the Cambodian authorities. On 7 October 2015, [Vein Vorn](#) was [arrested](#) and sentenced to jail for opposing the proposed construction of a hydroelectric dam in the Areng Valley. In prison, he joined three other environmental rights defenders and members of Mother Nature Cambodia, **Try Sovikea**, **Sun Mala** and **Sim Samnang**, detained for calling on the government to stop a Vietnamese sand dredging company from polluting the environment in Koh

Kong province. They were all released between March and July 2016 after their sentences were suspended.

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the arrest of human rights defenders Doem Kundy and Hun Vannak and the charges held against them, which it believes are solely motivated by their peaceful and legitimate work for environmental rights in Cambodia.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Cambodia to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally release **Doem Kundy** and **Hun Vannak** and drop all charges against them, as it is believed that they are solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Reverse the removal of **Mother Nature Cambodia** from the registry of authorised non governmental organisations, as Front Line Defenders believes they have been targeted solely as a result of their legitimate human rights activities;
3. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in **Cambodia** and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.