

From Catherine Ashton

To the signatories of the letter of 23 August:

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Human Rights Watch

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Dear Helmut

Thank you for your letter of 23 August regarding threats to civil society in Cambodia.

The European Union is closely following recent developments in Cambodia in the areas of freedom of association, expression and assembly and, in particular, remains engaged at the highest levels with the Royal Government of Cambodia on the draft Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

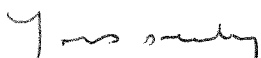
Since you wrote there have been positive developments and a sign of opening by the Government. The Law is currently being redrafted and some of the concerns you mention are now being addressed. For example, I understand that NGOs currently registered will not have to re-register, while there should be significant amendments to the procedures for registration to ensure a simpler process. Smaller associations in rural areas will also not have to be officially registered, but simply inform the local authorities if they are undertaking projects or other activities. We welcome this continuing dialogue and reflection process by the Government.

In fact, for well over a year, the EU and the Member States represented in Phnom Penh have been raising our concerns that any NGO Law to be adopted should ensure an enabling environment for NGOs in order to safeguard the constitutional freedoms the Government has to date been able to guarantee. The EU has asked the Government to consult widely in drawing up such a law, and to ensure that it encourages, rather than restricts, the growth of civil society. In this regard, the EU has coordinated closely with like-minded Embassies and development partners.

The EU and the Heads of Mission in Phnom Penh have impressed upon the Government that Cambodian and international organisations subject to the law are vital partners of donor governments in delivering aid to the Cambodian people. The EU has equally emphasised that the associations and NGOs that would be regulated by this law have played a crucial role during Cambodia's remarkable transition over recent decades, and their best efforts are still needed for Cambodia's continued development.

As regards the NGO Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT), the EU strongly believes that a healthy civil society is an essential pillar of development and that transparency, the rule of law, freedom of expression and open political debate are indispensable elements of democracy. The European Union and its Member States have for many years supported the Government's efforts for development, democratic governance and human rights in Cambodia. We will therefore continue to encourage the Cambodian Government to facilitate the work of existing and emerging civil society organisations in Cambodia.

The EU will remain actively engaged on this topic and appreciate any further information or opinions you wish to share with us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Y. S. S. S.', written in a cursive style.A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'C. Ashton', written in a cursive style.

Catherine Ashton