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Channy a 'prisoner of conscience'

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Amnesty International has listed Cheam Channy as a "prisoner of conscience" after the opposition parliamentarian was jailed for seven-years in what human rights workers have called a "show trial."

Channy was convicted by a Military Tribunal August 9 of organizing an illegal armed force for his role in a shadow defense cabinet known as Committee 14.

"Amnesty International is calling for his immediate and unconditional release," said Janice Beanlan, from the South East Asia team of Amnesty's International Secretariat, in an August 11 email to the *Post*.

"Not only does [the case] highlight serious flaws in the administration of justice, including an apparent lack of political will to conform to both domestic and international laws, but it is also a chilling reminder of how far the authorities are willing to go to stifle freedom of expression and association and political opposition," Beanlan wrote.

Channy is the only Cambodian considered a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty. They are the latest international organization to condemn his conviction, saying it was based on trumped up charges.

"With this verdict, the level of political repression in Cambodia has reached new heights," said an Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) statement released August 10.

"The purpose of the legal action against the two members of parliament, and their party leader, was for the governing party to quash dissent by making it impossible for legitimate opposition to function,"

AHRC wrote.

"A deep sense of fear and frustration has enveloped the country," said the Hong Kong-based rights group.

On August 11, however, Prime Minister Hun Sen downplayed the local and international backlash.

"[I] confirm to the nation and our Cambodian people that our country has no political crisis, the trial of this or that guy is just a matter between personal and the legal procedures," Hun Sen said during a speech launching an economic zone in Bavet, on the Vietnamese border.

Hun Sen dismissed concern over the leader of the opposition party, Sam Rainsy, who fled in February after his parliamentary immunity was stripped along with that of Channy and another party member, Chea Poch.

"Wherever you've been and whenever you come back, I do not know, because it is a matter for the court," said Hun Sen. "It is not a headache [for me]."

Rainsy is currently in France. He is scheduled to return "around September 14," according to an August 11 email from him to the *Post*.

"When there is a storm, you have to take shelter and wait for the storm to subside," Rainsy wrote.

"In a messy country like present Cambodia, they call an 'illegal army' anything that looks a little bit organized and works with some efficiency," he said regarding the Channy case. "They would crack down on the Salvation Army if there were such an organization here."

Son Chhay, a Sam Rainsy Party parliamentarian, said SRP members were preparing to write a letter to King Norodom Sihamoni to request a royal amnesty for Channy.