

INDEPENDENT RADIO STATION OWNER FALSELY ACCUSED OF INCITING SEPARATIST UPRISING

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Reporters Without Borders and the Cambodian Centre for Independent Media firmly condemn *Radio Beehive* owner **Mam Sonando**'s arrest on 15 July in Phnom Penh for supposedly inciting residents of a southeastern province to stage an "uprising" in response to the government's seizure of their land.

"We urge the government to fully explain the charges that have been brought against this journalist," the two organizations said. "Sonando's arrest is like a parting slap to all those who attended last week's ASEAN summit in Phnom Penh. As soon the diplomats leave, the authorities arrest dissidents.

"The arrest of those who report the views of human rights defenders has highlighted the sensitivity of a number of recent developments, especially the complaint that Cambodian activists have brought before the International Criminal Court, and shows that the government has no intention of remaining passive in the face of all the news coverage they have been getting."

Aged 71 and the owner of independent *Radio Beehive FM 105* (called *Sambok Khmum* in Khmer), Sonando was arrested by a score of plainclothes police at his Phnom Penh home at around 9 a.m. on 15 July.

They had a warrant issued by a Phnom Penh municipal court accusing him of "insurrection" and inciting others to "take up arms against the state" with the aim of creating a "state within the state." His lawyer, Sok Sam Oeun, said he was facing a possible sentence of 7 to 15 years in prison.

After a court hearing the next day, Sonando was transferred to Pey Sor prison on the outskirts of the capital, where he could spend the next six months in pre-trial detention.

The charges relate to demonstrations that residents of the village of Broma, in the southeastern province of Kratie, staged from 15 to 17 May in protest against the seizure of their land for a foreign-run rubber plantation. A 14-year-old girl was killed when the authorities used force to break up the protests.

Prime Minister Hun Sen publicly called for Sonando's arrest in a 26 June speech and a Kratie provincial court issued a warrant on 2 July. Sonando was out of the country during the Broma protests because he had gone to meet with the Cambodian activists who filed a complaint before the ICC accusing Hun Sen of human rights violations. Hun Sen's call for his arrest came the day after *Radio Beehive* broadcast a report about the ICC complaint.

Pa Nguon Teang, the head of the Cambodian Centre for Independent Media, told Reporters Without Borders: "Mam Sonando was arrested because of the radio station, because he uses it to empower people and provide information to millions of Cambodians, and has become very influential. The government says he was arrested as the leader of

an organization supposedly involved in separatist activities, the Democrat Association, but this is false excuse.”

He added: “More and more people are protesting against the government over various issues, and the government has been trying to silence them as quickly possible. Mam Sonando has been targeted because he is one of the most outspoken critics and because he owns an independent radio station that is very a popular. His activities are not illegal but his arrest is.”

When reached by Reporters Without Borders, Ou Virak of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights said: “Mam Sonando’s arrest is definitely linked to his radio station. *Radio Beehive* is the only station in Cambodia willing to report what opposition parties and civil society organizations say without censoring them. This is a major blow to freedom of expression.”

Sonando’s arrest came two days after the ASEAN regional forum that was held in Phnom Penh from 9 to 13 July. He was previously detained in 2003 and 2005 on charges of defamation, disinformation and inciting criminal activity.