

## NATIONAL

## Gov't Defends NGO Law, but Is Open to Change

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A government-led workshop on a proposed law to regulate the country's more than 3,000 NGOs and civil society groups appeared to raise as many questions as it answered yesterday, without allaying fears it could stifle public debate.

At the end of the day, the dozens of NGOs who took part remained as unclear as ever about undefined provisions in the draft law and continued calling on the government for more time to parse the draft, which was released less than a month ago, and offer suggestions.

Interior Minister Sar Kheng tried to allay those fears at the meeting yesterday.

"The government does not have any intent to threaten or suppress," he said in his opening remarks. "If we have any plan like that, we would have no workshop like today."

But the draft follows repeated complaints by government officials, including Prime Minister Hun Sen, that some NGOs have acted as proxies for the opposition. The draft law also comes after a year in which the UN's human rights envoy to Cambodia said the space for public debate was already shrinking.

Yesterday, Mr Kheng said the government needed the law to make sure terrorist groups did not try to hide under the NGO banner.

"We have to consider all of these

concerns," he said, citing the case of the Cambodian Freedom Fighters, a resistance group members of which have been convicted of attempting to topple the government by force of arms. It was unclear yesterday whether the CFF had any NGO affiliation.

Pressed about the possibility of more workshops on the law after his speech, Mr Kheng remained ambivalent, but opened the door to redrafting sections of the law.

But in going through the draft article by article, Interior Ministry Secretary of State Nuth Sa An dismissed many of the NGOs' prime concerns. Several of them expressed fears that the registration applications and annual reports the draft calls for could be difficult to complete for smaller organizations, some little more than local self-help groups that draw on scant funding and even less technical expertise.

"I don't agree," Mr Sa An said bluntly. "Maybe you don't want to make a report."

He also brushed aside concerns that the requirement of photographs and personal profiles of NGO workers would be an intimidating factor.

"People who don't want to show their profile, maybe they don't have a good background... Maybe they are afraid," he said. "If you are a good person, you don't have to worry."

NGOs have also criticized a provision requiring that all associations

register and have at least 21 members, calling it an affront to the country's own constitutional protections on the freedom of assembly.

Mr Sa An said the threshold would assure that associations generated enough money from membership fees to fund their agendas.

"We want to make it easy for them," he said. "So when they establish the organizations they can operate easily."

Unmollified, NGOs repeated concerns they had come into the meeting with later in the afternoon.

"Where are the human rights provisions, the freedom of assembly?" asked Janardhan Rao, country director of NGO Concern Worldwide. "It raises some fundamental questions."

Mr Rao feared that demanding that small community groups register would bring an end to the very associations his NGO relies on to actually carry out the bulk of its fieldwork.

"For small organizations...meeting these requirements is extreme," agreed Andrew Boname, chief of party for the East-West Management Institute. Rather than a one-size-fits-all model, he suggested a tiered registration system placing the least burden on the smallest groups.

"Otherwise, these groups won't form, they won't evolve, and it will hamper the development of civil society," he said.