

Hun Sen focuses ire on NGO law critics

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PRIME Minister Hun Sen yesterday took aim at critics of the government's new draft NGO legislation, ahead of a government-hosted consultation on the issue on Monday.

Speaking at the inauguration of a high school in Kampong Cham province, Hun Sen slammed critics of the law in the NGO community, arguing that they were demanding too many rights.

"How many rights do you have so far? You have many rights to insult [the government] every day," Hun Sen said in his speech. "Or do you need more rights to hit the heads of others?"

The premier deflected recent concerns from NGOs that the intent of the new draft law was to control, rather than enable, civil society and suggested that organisations were exceeding their mandate.

"Even now, if there is a draft [law] to control NGOs, they play the role of the National Assembly. [The government] will allow a consultation but the adoption of the law depends on the National Assembly," he said.

Local rights group Licadho yesterday released a new analysis of the draft legislation,

containing some of the most trenchant criticisms of the law yet.

It states that the draft, made public December 15, "confirms long-standing fears that the government's desire for such a law is in order to control, rather than promote and strengthen, civil society".

The law is the third attempt by the government to regulate the country's large NGO sector.

Licadho claimed the draft was a direct attack on the independence of NGOs, going on to say that it constitutes

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"the most serious threat to civil society in years".

"The draft law seeks to take the 'N' out of 'NGOs', turning them into de facto government organisations," the report states.

"It ignores the very concept of NGOs, associations and other civil society actors, that they are independent and should not be controlled by the government."

Licadho said there are several specific areas of concern in the draft law, including restrictions on freedom of association, registration requirements, the authority given to government officials, reporting

requirements and restrictions placed on foreign NGOs.

Meanwhile, following a meeting with roughly 250 NGO representatives in Phnom Penh on Tuesday, four umbrella organisations released a joint statement calling for changes to the draft law.

The Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, NGO Forum on Cambodia, Medicam and the Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee said the draft law would "restrict" the work of NGOs working in all sectors of the Kingdom by placing "significant barriers on their registration and implementation of their work".

The four groups plan to submit detailed recommendations to the government in a report that they said represents the inputs of more than 500 civil society organisations on the new legislation.

The statement called for a longer consultation period and the establishment of a "joint working group" made up of government and civil society representatives.

Lun Borithy, executive director of CCC, said the NGOs had completed their analysis and would make it public today. CCC senior operations and finance manager Soeung Saroeun said CCC representatives met with officials from the Ministry of Interior yesterday. ■