

## NATIONAL

# Draft NGO Law Back at Ministry of Interior

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Government officials on Friday said a controversial draft law aimed at regulating the NGO sector, currently at the Council of Ministers, could see changes as it undergoes a review by the Ministry of Interior.

"The Interior Ministry sent a request two weeks ago in order to recheck the law due to a lot of reactions so far from the NGOs," said Lieutenant General Khieu Sopheak, spokesman of the Interior Ministry.

"Now we have the law back and we will check it all again," he said.

Whether the revision of the draft represents a reaction to complaints from NGOs, however, is unclear.

Spokesman for the Council of Ministers Phay Siphon stressed that the draft law was not "sent back,"

but that the review is a customary step in the law-making process.

"The [law] is under a period of counseling. It doesn't mean it was sent back, though. Under this counseling period, we have the full right to change" the law, Mr Siphon said.

"Whoever said it was sent back is manipulating the information," he said, referring to a media article published on Thursday, which said the draft had been returned to the Ministry of Interior for revision due to the ongoing international outcry over the draconian nature of the current draft of the law.

Mr Siphon said criticisms of the draft had nothing to do with the review. "It doesn't mean it is sent back and forth," Mr Siphon said. "It is still with the Council of Ministers."

Both Mr Sopheak and Mr Siphon refused to discuss what might be changed at this stage, but NGOs and international aid agencies have long been pushing for a massive overhaul of the draft.

"We do hope the government will consider to make changes based on what we have requested so far," said Lun Borithy, executive director of NGO umbrella group the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia.

Despite government statements to the contrary, Mr Borithy appealed for an opportunity for NGOs to provide input to the draft, even at this late stage.

"We do want to join a meeting for discussion on the law, and we want to see what they did change in order to become confident with this law," he said.