



17 May 2021

Senator the Hon. Marise Payne  
Minister for Foreign Affairs  
Parliament House  
Canberra, ACT 2600

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Dear Minister Payne

**RE: COVID-19 HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN CAMBODIA**

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about the burgeoning human rights crisis in Cambodia, and we write to you now in the hopes of alerting the Australian government to this increasingly precarious situation and the necessity of the international community to act swiftly to prevent further harm.

The Cambodian authorities put in place a strict lock-down on 19 April after a third wave of COVID-19 transmissions, designating a series of “red zones” across the capital, Phnom Penh, and other cities including Takhmao, Preah Sihanouk and Poipet. People within these zones have been prohibited from leaving their homes, even to buy food or basic necessities.

**Thousands of residents have been left to go hungry** from the combined effects of:

- Being unable to leave their houses for extended periods of time to seek out food and supplies, with some households being under sustained lockdown since 9 April,
- A scarcity of food supply sources since markets and mobile food vendors have been forcibly closed within red zones,
- And a year of economic hardship from the global pandemic leaving many Cambodians unable to afford food supplies, especially when considering the abrupt cancellation of the government’s cash distribution initiative in late April.

Since 19 April, Amnesty International has heard distressing reports of humanitarian NGOs being barred from distributing food and other essential aid within red zones to help alleviate this suffering.

**We urge you to call on the Cambodian government to work with NGOs and UN agencies to facilitate humanitarian access to red zones.**

Everyone under lockdown must be provided access to adequate food, water, health care, and other essential items as a matter of human rights. Lockdown restrictions must be coupled with increased social protection measures and humanitarian assistance to ensure Cambodia’s fulfilment of its **human rights obligations regarding the right to food.**

Amnesty International’s concerns in Cambodia extend further, however, in response to reports of reprisals and threats designed to silence hungry residents in Phnom Penh, the nation’s capital. Pleas for assistance posted in online Facebook forums have reportedly been met with threats and intimidation by local authorities, while a

Telegram group designed to coordinate emergency food provisions have had messages sporadically disabled by Phnom Penh authorities.

In a speech on 20 April, Prime Minister Hun Sen warned residents that the government could deny them food aid if they continued protesting and voicing their concerns.

Furthermore, the implementation of the Law on Measures to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 and other Serious, Dangerous and Contagious Diseases (COVID-19 Law) on 11 March 2021 has been connected to a violent crackdown on those believed to have broken lockdown restrictions.

The use of unnecessary and excessive force by law enforcement officers cements the need for a radical re-thinking of COVID-19 suppression techniques in Cambodia.

The Australian government should urge this re-thinking that must hold human rights at its core, and implement the following changes:

- Immediately tackle hunger in Cambodian cities, working in conjunction with NGOs and UN agencies to prioritise humanitarian outreach to those suffering from the threat or reality of hunger,
- Ensure law enforcement officers are not:
  - a. Resorting to the use of force to punish violations of lockdown restrictions,
  - b. Preventing resident from meeting their basic needs for survival,
  - c. Or using disproportionate or unnecessary force in general,
- And cease the use of threat or intimidation by local authorities to silence hungry residents from issuing pleas for assistance or food supplies.

Lastly, universal and fair access to COVID-19 vaccines is the only way out of the pandemic. Amnesty International remains deeply concerned and disappointed that Australia is one of the few countries that are continuing to block the TRIPS waiver proposal that would allow more countries to manufacture and distribute COVID-19 vaccines and health products.

The United States of America, France and Spain have each signalled their intent to support the waiver, and the European Union is likely to approve support in coming days. Your Government remains one of the few countries actively blocking the waiver - Australia is being left behind and isolated on the global stage.

**For the sake of global health and a faster end to the pandemic, we urge you to please support the TRIPS waiver.** Direct assistance to Cambodia through the provision of PPE and other needed support must also continue.

For further information, or to discuss and organise a meeting, please contact Joel MacKay at [joel.mackay@amnesty.org.au](mailto:joel.mackay@amnesty.org.au) or 0424 242 112.

Yours sincerely,



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