

For immediate release

Thailand Returns UNHCR Recognised Refugee to Cambodia Despite Overwhelming Safety Concerns

Bangkok, 9 February 2018, 14:00: The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network strongly condemns the Royal Thai Government for the recent return of Sam Sokha, a UNHCR recognised refugee from Cambodia. Reports indicate that Sam Sokha was returned to Cambodia by Thai authorities late yesterday, despite this being a clear breach of national and international laws.

Sam Sokha has been a vocal critic of the ruling Cambodia's People's Party (CPP) for some time. She is perhaps most well known for the widely circulated video of her throwing her shoe at a ruling party billboard in Preah Sihanouk province in 2017. In July 2017, amidst a crackdown against political dissidents, an arrest warrant was issued for Sam Sokha for "incitement to discriminate" and "insult of a public official". These charges, which carry a prison term of up to three years and six days, respectively, are both spurious and politically motivated. She was forced to flee Cambodia to Thailand in late 2017.

Yiombi Thona, the Chair of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) refers to Sam Sokha's deportation as "a shameful day for Thailand and a giant step backwards for refugee protection in the region." In addition, he stated, "Thailand should be held accountable for their actions and must not be allowed to brush this incident under the carpet."

Thailand hosts thousands of urban refugees, of which many live in de facto hiding with limited protection and minimal access to health, legal and educational services. The clandestine deportation of Sam Sokha is sadly, and deplorably not the first case where the Thai government has buckled to the political pressure of foreign governments and returned a refugee to a perilous future in their home country.

In early January 2018, Thai Immigration arrested Sam Sokha for overstaying her visa. She was subsequently fined and received a suspended prison sentence before being transferred to Bangkok's Suan Phlu Immigration Detention Centre. When deported, she was in the process of appealing her immigration charges.

Despite not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, Thailand is obligated to adhere to the globally recognised principle of non-refoulement. The return of Sam Sokha to Cambodia is a blatant violation of this underlying principle and severely calls into question the Thai Government's commitment to human rights and protection of vulnerable individuals.

About APRRN:

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network is a vibrant network of over 320 civil society organisations and individuals from 28 countries in the Asia Pacific region committed to advancing the rights of refugees, through joint advocacy, capacity-strengthening, resource sharing and outreach.

Media Contact:

Evan Jones, Programme Coordinator, Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN)

Tel: +66 (02) 234 2679 | **Email:** Evan@aprrn.info | **Fax:** +66 2 689 62 05