

2012 hope for top UN rights body Cheang Sokha and Vincent MacIsaac

Friday 30 December 2011

The government has softened its stance against the UN's human- rights office in Cambodia, with Foreign Minister Hor Namhong suggesting yesterday the agreement to allow it to remain here will be extended past its expiry date tomorrow.

This follows heated calls last year from Prime Minister Hun Sen that the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights be shut and its then-country representative, Christophe Peschoux, expelled for "acting as a spokesman for the opposition".

Hor Namhong was conciliatory yesterday. Asked if the memorandum of understanding between the office and the government would be extended, he told the Post the government was reviewing it and said: "I think there will be no problem."

Staff at the UN rights office declined to comment, but acknowledged that they planned to show up for work next week.

Cambodian Centre for Human Rights president OU Virak said it would be "surprising" if the office was shut. "Given international pressure, Cambodia's chairing of ASEAN next year, and its effort to gain a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council, it would be unwise if Cambodia did not extend [the MoU]," he said.

The US embassy reiterated its view that the office was vital.

"As Secretary [Hillary] Clinton said during her trip to Cambodia last year, the [office] is a very valuable resource. Its work is important and we would like to see it continue," Sean McIntosh, a public-affairs officer at the embassy, said.

"Co-operation between the UN and the Cambodian government assists in promoting human rights, ending the trafficking in persons, and upholding the rule of law."

Ou Virak said the government had used the MoU as a tool to remove Peschoux, who had been an outspoken advocate for victims of rights abuses. Peschoux left Cambodia in May, saying his departure was voluntary.

"We all know the real reason [Peschoux left]," Virak said, adding that it was likely an announcement would be made soon naming Peschoux's replacement. Since departing, his deputy, James Heenan, has led the office, which Virak said was "doing a pretty good job".

Human Rights Watch also "strongly supported" the continuation of the office's presence. Phil Robertson, deputy director of its Asia division, said it was critical to protecting human-rights defenders.

HRW “is strongly focused on ensuring that the human rights protection mandate [of the MoU] is continued”, he said.

The UN office’s ability to independently investigate rights abuses was critical, Robertson said, adding that it could alert others about the human-rights situation in Cambodia.

Courtesy The Phnom Penh Post

December 30, 2011