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**Charges Against ADHOC Staffer Mark Decade's Most Serious Threat to
Human Rights Work in Cambodia**

Phnom Penh (August 15, 2012) – We, the undersigned civil society groups, deeply regret the Phnom Penh Municipal Court's decision to pursue politically-motivated charges against outspoken human rights worker Chan Soveth for legitimate actions related to his work.

Soveth has been summoned to answer charges that he illegally aided a resident of a Kratie village that was brutally raided by armed government forces in May. A 14-year-year-old girl was killed in the operation. Authorities assert that villagers were planning to secede from Cambodia and create their own state.

Authorities allege that Soveth, a prominent staff member at the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) since 1995, offered unspecified assistance to one of the supposed leaders of the "secession movement". Soveth has long been one of the most outspoken critics of the Cambodian government's human rights track record.

The summons was issued less than two weeks after a nationally-televised speech by the Prime Minister in which he implored an unnamed NGO worker to "confess" for his role in aiding the Kratie villagers. During the speech, the Prime Minister turned to his staff and asked "Has he been called for questioning? Not yet? Not yet called ...". Records indicate that the criminal case against Soveth was opened a mere 48 hours after the Prime Minister's speech.

"Soveth's summons represents the boldest attack against human rights work that we've seen in a decade," said Suon Bunsak, Executive Secretary of CHRAC "It is nothing short of an attempt to criminalize legitimate NGO activities."

According to a summons issued by Phnom Penh Municipal Court Investigating Judge Chhay Virak, Soveth is suspected of violating article 544 of the Penal Code, which forbids providing assistance to the perpetrator of a felony. The crime requires that the prosecutor prove that the recipient of the assistance committed a felony. There is no credible evidence of such crimes here.

Authorities have not presented any evidence of the secession movement beyond blanket allegations. But it is well-known that the villagers have been embroiled in an ongoing land dispute with Casotim, a company that holds a 15,000 hectare land concession near their village.

It is also well-established under both Cambodian and international law that there can be no criminal offense in the absence of intent. With the absence of any credible underlying felony, Soveth's assistance to a victim of land-grabbing – which falls firmly within ADHOC's mandate – cannot and must not be criminalized.

Soveth's summons comes on the heels of the arrest of independent radio station owner Mam Sanando, who also stands charged with crimes related to the alleged "secessionist movement"

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in Kratie. He is currently jailed awaiting trial. He faces 30 years imprisonment if convicted on all charges. In a disturbing parallel to Soveth's case, the Prime Minister called for the arrest of Sonando in a nationally-televised speech.

"This has been the worst year for human rights in Cambodia in over a decade, by just about any measure," said Naly Pilorge, Director of LICADHO. "We have seen increased violence, increased use of force by the authorities, an increase in killings, increased judicial intimidation, and now we see an attempt to criminalize legitimate human rights work."

"This case threatens to destroy all remnants of Cambodia's vibrant civil society - one of the last standing positive aspects of UNTAC's legacy."

Soveth has been summoned to appear for questioning in Phnom Penh Municipal Court on Aug. 24 at 8 a.m. If convicted, he faces one to three years imprisonment and a fine of US \$500 to US \$1,500.

We, the undersigned groups, urge the Phnom Penh Municipal Court to maintain its independence in this case. We also call upon the executive branch to refrain from interfering with the judicial process. It is our belief that an independent review will clear Soveth from the above allegations.

Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM)
Cambodia's Civil Servants Association (CICA)
Cambodian Defender Project (CDP)
Cambodian Food and Service Worker Federation (CFSWF)
Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC)
Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
Cambodian Worker Center for Development (CWCD)
Cambodian Youth Network (CYN)
Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC)
Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL)
Community Legal Education Center (CLEC)
Community Peacebuilding Network (CPN)
Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC)
Coordination of Action Research on AIDS (CARAM)
Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF)
Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA)
Khmer Youth Association (KYA)
Legal Aid of Cambodia (LAC)
People's Action for Change (PAC)
SahmakumTeangTnaut (STT)