

Cambodian groups accuse authorities of sexually harassing female strikers

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The groups issued the call in response to recent round-ups of striking NagaWorld casino workers.

Cambodian civil society groups, community organizations, and trade unions on Thursday accused governmental officials of sexually harassing female strikers and applying COVID prevention rules arbitrarily as part of an effort to break up recent labor demonstrations.

A [joint statement signed by 51 groups](#) specifically points to how authorities have handled members of the Labor Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld, most of whom are women.

Since striking from the hotel and casino in December 2021, the workers have been subjected to violence, imprisonment and the arbitrary application of COVID-19 measures, the letter from the groups states.

“Women strikers have been repeatedly and disproportionately targeted by government efforts to disperse the peaceful strike,” the groups said.

Authorities have denied the women access to bathrooms near the strike site, prevented them from returning home until after dark, and followed them once they were allowed to leave.

On Tuesday, a male officer grabbed and squeezed the breast of one woman while she was being forced onto a bus, the groups said. Similarly, on Dec. 29, state authorities used vulgar sexual language with a striker and threatened to sexually assault her.

Among the groups that signed the joint statement were the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association, the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, the Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights, and the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia.

Their statement says that in February, the strikers repeatedly complied with governmental orders to undertake multiple COVID-19 virus tests and fulfilled quarantine orders.

Despite meeting the terms, 64 workers were forcibly taken to a quarantine facility on Monday as they tried to resume their strike. They were allowed to return home later that evening after complying with further COVID-19 testing, the groups said.

But on Tuesday, authorities took 39 strikers to the same quarantine center that lacks beds and water for drinking and bathing. On the following day, authorities escorted 51 additional strikers to the facility.

Each of the workers has been fined up to 2 million riels (U.S. \$470) for allegedly violating COVID-19

measures as they tried to resume their strike, the groups said.

Thousands of employees from the Hong Kong-owned NagaWorld Casino in Cambodia's capital walked off the job in mid-December, demanding higher wages and the reinstatement of eight jailed union leaders and nearly 370 others they said were unjustly fired from the casino.

Eleven members of the Labor Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld, including seven women, have been arrested since December 2021, and are being held in pre-trial detention, the groups said in their statement. The women have been charged with incitement to commit a felony and face up to two years in prisons if convicted.

Phnom Penh City Hall security personnel rounded up another 27 strikers on Thursday and took them to a quarantine facility on the outskirts of town where about 90 other workers picked up during other strikes are being also held.

Authorities released 35 workers from the larger group, without providing them with transportation home, and sent four workers who tested positive for COVID-19 for treatment, according to one of the workers.

Authorities wanted to release more employees, but the workers refused to leave until everyone in the group was let go, said the woman, who declined to give her name.

Phnom Penh City Hall issued a statement on Thursday denying that security personnel sexually harassed the striking casino workers and accused the NGOs of issuing false information about COVID-19 prevention measures.

Authorities found that several strikers they had rounded over the past few days to be COVID-19 positive, the statement said.

"It is outrageous to have statements accusing the authorities of using violence, including sexual harassment, against the women workers," the statement said.

The statement said that strikers with evidence of harassment file legal complaints.

Authorities also said journalists had issued statements "contrary to the fact." But they prevented local and foreign reporters from covering the round-up of workers on Thursday, spraying hand sanitizer on the journalists' equipment in some cases. They also prohibited human rights monitors from recording incidents of harassment.

RFA could not reach City Hall officials or Cambodian government spokesman Phay Siphan for additional comment.

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