

Six ‘fearless’ young activists of the Mother Nature Cambodia group jailed for climate campaigns

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(CNN) — They are young and passionate about protecting Cambodia’s rich and ecologically fragile environment.

Their peaceful green campaigns have been championed by climate activist [Greta Thunberg](#) and in 2015, they successfully fought against a plan for a hydroelectric dam they claim would have damaged a pristine rainforest valley.

But this week, the Southeast Asian nation sentenced 10 activists from the group Mother Nature Cambodia to up to six years in prison each on charges of conspiring against the state.

The government says the group encourages social unrest, but to their supporters, the ruling is just the latest in a pattern of attacks on climate activists in the wider region.

“We demand that our friends in Mother Nature Cambodia, and all political prisoners, be released immediately,” said Fridays for Future, the [youth-led global climate strike movement](#) founded by Thunberg, in a statement.

Exiled opposition leader Mu Sochua said the group had tried to highlight environmental issues that “threaten Cambodia’s fragile environment” and claimed, “they would be heroes in any free country.”

“Their convictions only show how Cambodian courts are simply being used as weapons (by the state) to halt any kind of public discussion,” Mu Sochua told CNN. “The sentences are a disaster for environmentalism in Cambodia and for people everywhere, who care about the future of our planet.”

Cambodia, a kingdom of nearly 17 million people that is rich in natural resources, faces pressing threats to its environment, including deforestation from illegal logging and agricultural expansion, water pollution affecting inland and coastal areas, and a surge in plastic waste.

The country maintains about 46% forest cover and is home to 2,300 plant species and 14 endangered animals, according to the United States Agency for International Development. “Deforestation and wildlife crimes continue to threaten Cambodia’s forests and biodiversity,” USAID says on its website.

Critics and environmental groups say those threats have heightened under the nearly four-decade-long rule of strongman Hun Sen – who has quashed dissent and jailed opponents in recent years, forcing many to flee overseas.

Though his eldest son, Hun Manet, succeeded him as prime minister last year, [Hun Sen](#) is still

widely seen as the ruling party's center of power.

"Like what we are seeing with dictators in other countries, Cambodia is [becoming more repressed](#)," said Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson, a Spaniard who co-founded Mother Nature Cambodia over a decade ago, alongside local Cambodian activists.

Climate activism in the country is at a "rougher, grassroots level," he added, with the conversation centering more on "extremely rich and powerful tycoons and corrupt government officials trying to exploit and privatize," the environment.

"This is Cambodia now - logging, poaching, mineral extraction, turning lakes into land and destroying rivers, as well as exporting massive amounts of sands. There are systems in place where (officials) exploit the environment for profit and our group has been doing as much as we can to stop these unethical projects and protect the environment - and that is why we are a threat in the regime's eyes."

CNN has reached out to the Cambodian government for comment on the court ruling and allegations in this story.

Outside the court ahead of Tuesday's ruling, a government spokesperson denied that the charges against the activists were politically motivated.

"The government has never taken action against those who criticize. We only take action against those who commit crimes," spokesperson Pen Bona told Reuters.

Award-winning campaigners

Founded in 2012, Mother Nature Cambodia has campaigned against environmental destruction and exposed alleged corruption in state management of precious mineral resources, and their savvy use of social media has resonated with young Cambodians.

In 2023, the group was [awarded](#) the Right Livelihood Award, often called the "alternative Nobel Prize."

"Mother Nature Cambodia is a group of fearless young activists fighting for environmental rights and democracy in the face of repression by the Cambodian regime," the jury said in a speech at the time, describing them as "a powerful voice for environmental preservation and democracy in Cambodia."

Several activists were unable to receive the award in person as Cambodian courts denied their requests to travel to Sweden to collect the prize.

"They have successfully helped local communities stop environmental violations," Right Livelihood's executive director Ole von Uexkuell said last year. "Through innovative and often humorous protests, their activism defends nature and livelihoods while upholding communities' voices against corrupt and damaging products."

The group has strongly leveraged social media, saying it helps get their message across to young supporters. They have more than 450,000 followers on Facebook, the most widely used social platform in the country.

But it's on TikTok that their videos really make an impression on young Cambodian users like Run Bunry, a high-school student from the capital Phnom Penh and his friends. "They are positive and

lighthearted and also teach us a lot about the environment,” he said.

One video, [highlighting](#) an investigation into the alleged illegal export of rare silica sand, showed three members buried up to their heads in sand and was shared more than 1,000 times. Another viral video taken along a beach in the coastal city Sihanoukville showed the extent of alleged illegal construction by hotels and casinos on the shore.

“Follower numbers have grown especially in the last five years and a lot of our old content regularly resurfaces [on TikTok](#) and goes viral,” said founding member Gonzalez-Davidson, who was expelled from Cambodia in 2015 after the group’s successful campaign to stop a Chinese-funded hydropower dam from being built over the Areng Valley, an area of pristine rainforest in southwest Cambodia.

Members of the group say they have faced increasing threats, harassment and criminal charges for years.

Under scorching heat on Tuesday, members of the group – dressed in white and accompanied by a crowd of supporters – staged a mock funeral procession in the streets leading to the Phnom Penh Municipal Court.

But peaceful scenes descended into chaos after the sentencing was announced.

[Video footage](#) showed activists Mother Nature Cambodia activists Ly Chandaravuth, Long Kunthea, Thun Ratha, Phuon Keoraksmeay and Yim Leanghy surrounded by dozens of armed police officers and dragged away into waiting cars, bound for prisons across the country.

Rights activist Pilorge Naly of NGO the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights was at the scene and told CNN the arrests were immediate and violent. Journalists and supporters were also pushed and shoved by security officers, she said.

Arrest warrants have been issued for five other members of the group, including Gonzalez-Davidson, who was sentenced to eight years in prison Tuesday on the conspiracy charge and insulting Cambodia’s king.

“The increasing use by Cambodian authorities of lèse majesté and other articles of Cambodia’s criminal code to penalise the exercise of human rights is deeply worrying,” United Nations Human Rights spokesperson Thameen Al-Kheetan said in a statement following the ruling.

Gonzalez-Davidson, however, said the ruling would backfire against the authorities and inspire a new cohort of environmental campaigners.

“This week, a new generation of Cambodian activists was born – one that did not exist back in 2012,” he said.

“Many young Cambodians are very engaged in the next steps and public campaigning must continue. There have been (arrests and jailings) before and each time, we come out stronger.

“They won’t break our spirits. We are not going to be shut down.”

Heather Chen

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