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Protest murder of Cambodian union leader

Dear Friends,

On January 22 Chea Vichea, the president of the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC), which organizes garment workers, was shot dead in Phnom Penh. The Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) condemns this killing and deplores this use of violence to attempt to silence the movement for workers' rights in Cambodia. We call upon our network members to demand immediate action from the Cambodian government to investigate this murder and bring Vichea's killers and those behind the killing to justice. For more details of these tragic events and a sample letter you can send to the Cambodian government today, please see below.



Feb 2007, [Justice Still Needed in Chea Vichea Murder Case](#)

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GARMENT UNION LEADER SHOT DEAD IN CAMBODIA

(compiled from ICFTU, Reuters, BBC, Human Rights Watch, AP, AFP, Radio Free Asia reports and local sources)



Chea Vichea, 36, outspoken leader of the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC) was shot in the head and chest while reading a newspaper at a busy kiosk in Phnom Penh. He died on the spot of his wounds after his assailants fled the scene on a motorcycle. He is survived by his wife, who is seven months pregnant, and a three-year-old daughter.



Above: Funeral for 36-year old Chea Vichea

Vichea was also a founding member of the opposition Sam Rainsy party (Cambodia's main opposition party). He eventually left the party to focus on his union work but maintained close links with the party, which strongly criticizes the current Hun Sen government. In recent weeks three other members of the opposition have been murdered in Cambodia. While the circumstances and motives of Vichea's assassination have yet to be fully investigated, indications suggest that the killing was politically motivated.

On January 25th Buddhist monks headed up a procession of some 10,000 people, many of them garment workers, that accompanied Vichea's coffin from the union headquarters to the cremation site, a public park outside the royal temple Wat Botum.

"He did a lot of work defending the rights of garment workers and this incident is an attempt to threaten those who protect those rights," Kem Sokha, head of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, told reporters.

'Chea Vichea was one of the best-known and most outspoken voices for workers in Cambodia' said Sara Colm, senior researcher with Human Rights Watch's Asia division. 'This assassination will surely exacerbate the climate of fear for workers, journalists, environment and human rights activists who speak out or publicly demonstrate to express their views.'

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) immediately condemned the killing and filed an official complaint with the International Labor Organization (ILO). To read the text of that complaint, please see <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991218896>.

The ICFTU reports that according to numerous sources Vichea had received several death threats, notably one that was received on or around July 27, 2003, when national elections were held in Cambodia (note that during the run-up to that election 13 political party activists were murdered). The ICFTU is currently investigating the nature and origins of this specific death threat, which was sent to him by way of a text message on his cell phone and reportedly stated that he should be 'killed like a dog.' The ICFTU received a report that Vichea had succeeded in identifying the origin of this threat, and as a result went into hiding a number of times. He was also reportedly denied police protection in connection with these threats.

Vichea had won an appeal court case in September 2003 against the head of security at the Vinstar garment factory, who had physically attacked Vichea when he was distributing leaflets inviting workers to a rally celebrating Labour Day on May 1st of that year, according to the ICFTU.

ICFTU also reports that in April 2003, the FTUWKC lodged a complaint with the Committee on Freedom of Association of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), in which it indicated that Vichea, as well as the general secretary and 30 other members of the FTUWKC had been dismissed by the INSM Garment Factory (located in the Chum Chao District of Phnom Penh), as a reprisal for helping to establish a trade union at that company. In the wake of Vichea's killing, other FTUWKC members have reportedly received threats and been pressured to join other (pro-government) unions. The woman who owns the kiosk where Vichea was shot said she fears for her life and has requested protection from human rights groups and the United Nations.

Two men were arrested on January 28 in connection with Vichea's murder; one has denied involvement in the murder and the other has reportedly confessed. However, opposition leader Sam Rainsy said he does not believe the men were involved in the slaying and criticized the police handling of the case. On February 1 the Phnom Penh police said they were seeking a third man in connection with the murder. The FTUWKC has appealed to the international community to take action in response to the murder, requesting that people contact the Hun Sen government to demand an impartial investigation into the killing, and the arrest of Vichea's real killers and those who organized the killing.

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ACTION REQUEST

Please contact the Cambodian government today to protest the brutal murder of Chea Vichea. Request that they fully investigate the killing and arrest those who organized and carried out the killing.



SAMPLE LETTER

Mr. Hun Sen
Prime Minister
Kingdom of Cambodia
Phnom Penh
Fax: +855 23 88 06 24

Killing of FTUWKC President Chea Vichea

[insert date]

Dear Prime Minister Hun Sen,

I am contacting you to express my outrage at the January 22nd murder of trade union leader Chea Vichea. I call upon you to publicly denounce this brutal killing and take immediate steps to investigate and bring to justice those who organized and carried out Vichea's murder.

As the president of the Free Trade Union of the Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC) Vichea was an important leader in the struggle for workers' rights in Cambodia. His death is a tragic loss to the movement to improve the lives of workers in your country. This blatant attempt to silence the voice of workers, particularly the women and men in the garment and

textile industries, who are organizing and pushing for improvements cannot be tolerated.

In addition to taking clear and decisive action to bring Vichea's killers to justice, I believe the Cambodian government must take steps to ensure that assassinations like this do not happen again. In recent months a number of people (or their family members) who have voiced criticisms of your government have been killed, apparently with impunity. Not only trade unionists and other rights activists, but all the people of Cambodia must have the freedom to freely voice their opinions, without fear of reprisals. When threatened, they must be given the protection they need. According to a variety of sources, Vichea had received numerous death threats and was forced to go into hiding a number of times, however he was reportedly denied police protection, with tragic results.

Chea Vichea was a courageous man who undertook important and difficult work to push for positive change in Cambodia; as a result he lost his life. I urge you to give your personal attention to this very serious matter. Please keep me informed of the progress made by any governmental inquiry into Vichea's killing.

Sincerely,

[insert name]

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON UNIONS & THE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN CAMBODIA

The ICFTU has recently released a new report on the garment industry in Cambodia <<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991218894>>

The following is a summary:

CAMBODIA: TEXTILE WORKERS FACE A GLOOMY FUTURE Source: ICFTU Online, January 23, 2004

In January 2005 the end of the export quotas system for the textile sector will place Cambodia in direct competition with countries like China, whose labour force is particularly cheap and exploitable. So how will the Cambodian textile industry, the main employer in the country, manage to resist mass relocations to China? That is the key question in the new 8-page report.

In view of that potentially insecure future, how can the unions best attempt to defend workers? This new report describes the trade unions' situation in Cambodia, pointing out their relative freedom compared to other countries in the region, though also the constant pressure they endure owing to frequent sackings and intimidation. The report features statements made by union leader Chea Vichea who, having being dismissed owing to his determined defence of workers, was murdered January 22 in cold blood in Phnom Pen.

The working and living conditions of the 200,000 people -- 90% of whom are women -- employed in Cambodia's textile factories remain very tough. There have, however, been some slight improvements following the signing in 1999 of a trade agreement with the United States, which made exports conditional on respect for workers' rights. The report looks at that agreement.

The report also features the situation facing young women in Cambodia ' who are often exploited at their workplaces and sometimes abandoned to prostitution networks.

