

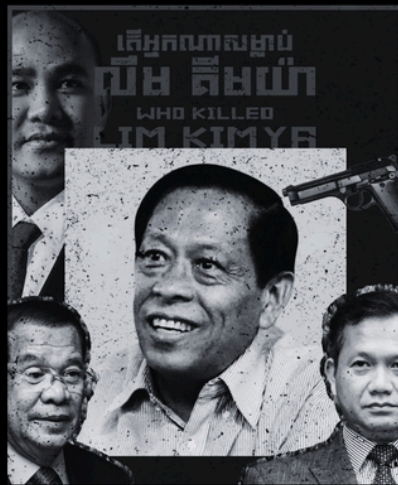
# NEWSLETTER

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## Impunity for transnational repression must end after murder of former Cambodian lawmaker in Bangkok

Transnational repression carried out by large authoritarian regimes such as China, Russia and Iran receives considerable media attention.

But when smaller dictatorship countries use the same tactics, the risk is that the repression will fall under the radar.

Diasporas from small countries, especially if they are widely dispersed around the world, do not form a large block of voters in any of their host countries. Politicians and the mainstream media in their host countries have little to gain by highlighting cases where they are intimidated or killed.

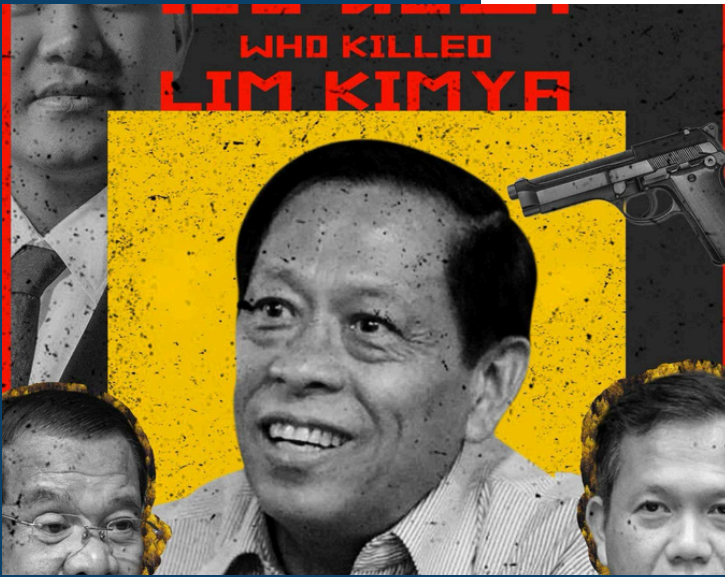
The cynical calculus of the dictators, therefore, is that smaller diasporas can be intimidated with impunity. It's a calculus that Cambodian dictator Hun Sen understands well. The Cambodian diaspora, which totals about 2 million people, is spread across Asian countries including Thailand and South Korea, Australasia, North America and Europe. The wide dispersal is a result of the Khmer Rouge genocide of 1975 to 1979, when Cambodians fled to any country that would accept them.

Dissent against the Hun family regime inside Cambodia is currently impossible. The opposition is banned, and virtually all of the Khmer and English-language media is state-controlled. The diaspora, therefore, is the only source of even partially open debate about the realities faced by Cambodia.

It's a debate that Hun Sen wants to shut down at any cost. A former Khmer Rouge commander, Hun Sen has made little serious attempt over the years to hide his transnational repression agenda. He threatened to beat up protestors against him on a visit to Australia in 2018. When he visited Brussels in 2022, Hun Sen ordered his henchmen to take photos of protestors and put them on display at Phnom Penh International Airport. The families of the protestors could expect visits from the authorities, Hun Sen said.



HE Lim Kimya



HE Lim Kimya

### Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The transnational repression carried out by Cambodia has the potential to combine with that carried out by much larger repressive regimes. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members are China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan. Cambodia has been a partner of the organization since 2015. The SCO was among the few organizations willing to send [observers to the Cambodian election of 2023](#), in which the opposition was barred from running. No credible international observers were willing to attend.

The SCO maintains a common blacklist of individuals and organizations under the auspices of its Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS). The blacklist is used by the regimes to deny each other's political opponents safe asylum.[1] Courts in member countries such as Kazakhstan have cited the SCO Treaty as the legal basis for extraditing exiles back to countries that routinely practice torture.

There can be no doubt that Cambodia is willing to pool information with the SCO for purposes of transnational repression. Myanmar's military junta and Cambodia are the only Southeast Asian governments with SCO dialogue partner status, and Cambodia signalled in 2024 that it [aims to deepen cooperation](#) to become an SCO observer.

Former Cambodian opposition member of parliament Lim Kimya was [shot dead in broad daylight](#) on January 7, 2025, shortly after arriving in Bangkok with his wife and brother by bus from Cambodia. Lim Kimya was elected as an opposition MP for the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in 2013. The party was dissolved by order of Cambodia's politically controlled supreme court in 2017.

Lim Kimya held French as well as Cambodian citizenship. In the absence of France acting to ensure a full investigation, there is an obvious risk that the truth about the people who ordered his killing will never be known.

The killing followed the pattern of intimidation of Cambodian exiles in Thailand. In January 2024, the Cambodian Srun Sorn and a co-worker were assaulted by unidentified men in Thailand's Samut Prakan province as they prepared for a workshop on the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements on Cambodia. Srun Sorn was left with a head wound after being attacked with a baton. Cambodian opposition supporter Vatt Mony was [beaten up by a group of four men](#) in Thailand in August 2023.

Vanna Hay is a young critic of the Hun regime living in Japan. Vanna Hay's political activism led to his Cambodian-based brother, Vannith Hay, being arrested in Cambodia on August 16, 2024. Vannith Hay, who has never had any connection with Vanna Hay's political activity, is a public servant in Cambodia's health ministry.

Vanna Hay made a video "confession" via [Facebook](#) on October 18, which clearly had the sole purpose of securing his brother's release. Its format follows the old Khmer Rouge routine. Vanna Hay confesses his "wrongdoing", denounces long-term exiled opposition leader Sam Rainsy as an "extremist", begs for forgiveness from Hun Sen, and requests to be allowed to join the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Hun Sen has publicly welcomed Vanna Hay as a CPP member. On the same day the video was posted, a judge in Phnom Penh signed a warrant authorizing the release of Vanna Hay's brother.

[1] "The International Dimensions of the New Transnational Repression" Written Testimony before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, September 12, 2019, by Alexander Cooley, Director of the Harriman Institute for the Study of Russia, Eurasia and Eastern Europe, Columbia University. [COOLEY-Alex-Testimony.pdf](#)



Nuon Toeun

**Nuon Toeun** left Cambodia to support her family and pursue a better life. She worked for over six years as a domestic employee in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She was arrested in September 2024 by Malaysian police, shortly after calling Hun Sen a “despicable guy” and handed over to the Cambodian authorities. She was denied access to a lawyer and deported. The Cambodian government labelled her as a “trouble-maker,” threw her into prison and charged her with “incitement.” She may face up to five years in prison, as well as a fine.

The Washington Post has reported that in July 2024 the Cambodian government canceled Toeun’s passport and informed Malaysia. Her host country then withdrew her work permit, making her an illegal migrant, and monitored her for the Cambodian authorities. Nuon Toeun’s family in December raised concerns about her health in prison in Phnom Penh, where she has been suffering from seizures.

The public shaming of critics such as Nuon Toeun is as barbaric and irrational as the witch hunts of previous centuries. Many poor developing countries are able to use the remittances sent by their diasporas to accelerate their economic growth. Nuon Toeun’s family faces severe consequences now that it has to survive without her support.

Pheng Vannak is a former interior ministry officer who has a long history of making violent threats against critics as a mouthpiece of the regime. Despite his Facebook pages having been suspended in the past, Pheng Vannak’s accounts are now active again, and he continues to post threatening messages. His recent posts have targeted individual refugees living in exile in South Korea.

On January 22, 2025, Pheng Vannak posted a photo of an activist called But Vichai, who is living in exile in South Korea, and revealed his date of birth, address, and passport expiration date. Pheng Vannak also threatened to revoke But Vichai’s passport, which would make him an illegal immigrant in South Korea.

On January 30, 2025, Pheng Vannak offered a reward of 2 million Khmer riel (about \$500) for the addresses of the parents of four critics living in exile in South Korea. He posted on Facebook on the same day that he would wait at the airport to arrest the critics when they return to Cambodia for their parents’ funerals.



Sorn Dara and his father

### Australia

The widow of government critic Kem Ley, who was assassinated in broad daylight in Phnom Penh in July 2016, fled to Australia with their five children, and is among the Cambodians to have received death threats there.

The Australian newspaper reported in 2022 that Hun Sen has divided Australia into seven zones, each controlled by a Cambodian military officer or official. Cambodian-Australians are rewarded for allegiance to Hun Sen, or singled out for punishment as traitors.

The network is used to conduct surveillance and provide reports to the regime on local opponents of Hun Sen, and has directly threatened violence against Cambodian-Australians, including former Victorian MP Hong Lim.

### Europe

Reprisals for diasporic protests are one part of the Hun regime’s strategy of transnational repression. In October 2015, two elected Cambodian opposition lawmakers were beaten up outside the national assembly after a diaspora protest in Paris during a visit by Hun Sen.



Taing Sarada, The Cambodia Daily Reporter

When Hun Sen visited Brussels in 2022, he ordered his henchmen to take photos of protestors and display them at Phnom Penh International Airport. The families of the protestors could expect visits from the authorities, Hun Sen said.

Sorn Dara is a Cambodian political refugee living in France. His father, Sok Sunnareth, is a retired military officer who has always supported the ruling Cambodian People's Party. Sok Sunnareth was arrested in November by military forces in Cambodia's southern Kampong Speu province in a bid to silence criticism of the regime by Sorn Dara.

## The US

The ongoing use of Cambodian government intimidation in Long Beach, California has been documented by research in 2022 in the peer-reviewed academic journal Pacific Affairs.<sup>[1]</sup> The research focuses on the Cambodian People's Party Youth Organization (CPPYO), a youth front of the ruling Cambodian People's Party. It shows that out of concern for the safety of family members in Cambodia, many in the diaspora have begun censoring themselves on social media in their private telephone calls, knowing they are under surveillance by a control room run by Hun Manet, Hun Sen's son who took over the office of prime minister from his father in 2023.

US-based Cambodian journalist Taing Sarada is among those who have been threatened. Taing Sarada has lived in the US since 2008 and has worked for respected outlets such as Voice of Democracy and Radio Free Asia. He has regularly reported on Cambodian issues such as corruption, money

## Conclusion

Many parts of the Cambodian diaspora live in democratic countries which respect the rule of law. They accept the responsibilities that come with living in a democracy. They should not have to live in fear. They deserve the same protection of their rights as enjoyed by all other citizens, and those who seek to curtail their freedoms must be punished.

Transnational repression has become a normal experience for the Cambodian diaspora. Lack of a serious international response means that transnational repression is a low-risk and low-cost exercise for dictators such as Hun Sen. This is a failure of the rule of

laundrying, land grabs, deforestation, human rights abuses and human trafficking.

The regular private death threats he has received became public in June 2023. Pheng Vannak, who is a licensed media publisher in Cambodia, on June 19 told Taing Sarada in an audio message sent via Facebook that he would cut his head off with an axe if he entered Cambodian territory. The threats were repeated in a Facebook Live broadcast by Pheng Vannak on June 22.

law in the countries where the diaspora lives. Urgent action is needed to restore the normal protections of the rule of law.

Governments which value democracy must condition their recognition of the Hun regime, and development assistance for Cambodia, on an end to transnational repression. The European Union should further restrict Cambodia's duty-free access to European markets under the "Everything But Arms" scheme.

Cambodia can't send arms to Europe. But members of the diaspora in Europe know that they, and their families, are at risk of being killed, even on European soil.

The US can take the lead by adopting the Transnational Repression Policy Act, introduced in March 2023 by a bipartisan group of senators made up of Jeff Merkley, Marco Rubio, Ben Cardin and Bill Hagerty.

The bill would mean that the US intelligence community would be tasked with identifying perpetrators of transnational repression and their methods. There would be a dedicated tip line for transnational repression reporting with the departments of Homeland Security and Justice, and outreach efforts to at-risk communities.

The US Secretary of State would produce annual reports on transnational repression, and the president would have powers to impose sanctions on those found to be involved. The bill also calls for study of the creation of a United Nations special rapporteur for transnational repression. This would be an important step in creating a systematic institutional response to Cambodian and other transnational repression cases.