

Press Release - for immediate release

18:00, 23 February 2015

Mother Nature Cambodia deplores founder's arrest



Mother Nature deplores the arrest of its Spanish founder and director Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson. Police officers detained him and one other Mother Nature activist, San Mala, at a cafe in central Phnom Penh around 13:00 hours, 23 February.

At 16:54 local time Mother Nature received an SMS message from Alex's phone while in police custody saying: "I am arrested and ready to be deported now – Alex."

At 17:39 Mother Nature received another message: "Message to youth and Cambodian nature lovers, stay strong, the battle is yours to be won. For Nature. Our Life."

Mother Nature cannot confirm the authenticity of these messages but believe they are from him.

His arrest comes days after his visa expired on 20 February. The Ministry of the Interior had asked to leave voluntarily but Alex decided to stay. Under Cambodian law he is allowed to stay for an additional 37 days as long as he pays the overstay fine. Our understanding is that the authorities may have overstepped the law and detained Alex without proper cause.

After 12 years living and working in Cambodia, Alex's rights to freedom of expression, to work, livelihood, and a home in Cambodia are all being denied and Mother Nature believes this is an infringement of his Human Rights. Alex hoped that by staying he could find a way to stay in the country he has long regarded as his home and for which he has campaigned hard to maintain the beautiful environment.

Today we have heard reports from communities in the Areng Valley – site of the proposed hydro-dam which Mother Nature is fighting – that a car with four Chinese workers supported by police and military has entered the valley. We will be doing everything we can to support the communities to halt what appears to be a resumption of the work. Even without Alex we will continue to fight the Areng Dam and call upon all nature activists in Cambodia and internationally to join our struggle.

The struggle to stop the Chinese Sinohydro Group from constructing the Chaey Areng hydro-electric dam in Cambodia's pristine Cardamom Mountain Protected Forest will continue.

In March 2014, Mother Nature activists stopped workers hired by Sinohydro from entering the Areng valley: "We regarded proposed feasibility studies as a disguise which would lead to destructive development in the area," said Alex. "We have been really effective at exposing this white elephant project. It is just an excuse for further corruption from logging and mining." He stated.

In 2014, Mother Nature worked with the Areng Valley communities set up a roadblock to the valley which repelled Chinese dam builders on several occasions. Eventually in September the roadblock was dismantled by police and military forces and 11 activists arrested, including Alex.

The denial of his visa comes after months of veiled deportation threats. An article in the Phnom Penh Post 12, December 2014 quoted Chheang Vun, a CPP lawmaker and spokesman for the National Assembly threatened a foreigner working at Mother Nature with deportation saying: "If I find that he did anything against what he pledged to the Ministry of Interior, I will request that the Immigration Department at the ministry arrest him and send him back to his home country".

Alex said this is "further evidence that what we have been doing so far is an effective campaign. It will inspire more Cambodians to get involved in the campaign and become nature activists."

This sends a powerful message to the international community that all foreigners working in Cambodia risk denial of visa or the threat of deportation for criticism of the government. It sets a dangerous precedent which further erodes Cambodia's already shaky democratic freedoms.

Deportation of foreign NGO activists is unusual in Cambodia. The last known cases were when activists from International NGO Global Witness provoked the government with a critical report in 2005.

Unclear how long he could be restricted from re-entering Cambodia, Alex said: "regardless of what might happen, I am really proud of what we have achieved so far, and I truly believe that the movement we have created, will only serve to accelerate the unstoppable growth of the movement in future."

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