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Cambodia orders repatriation of Christian Montagnards

Rights groups question treatment of persecuted minority

UCAnews.com (14.09.15) - <http://www.ucanews.com/news/cambodia-orders-repatriation-of-christian-montagnards/74254> - The Cambodian government has given the United Nations' refugee agency three months to return scores of Montagnard asylum seekers to Vietnam after refusing to give the persecuted Christian minorities refugee status.

Interior Ministry spokesman General Khieu Sopheak told ucanews.com on Sept. 14 that Cambodia asked the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, to "repatriate those illegal Montagnards within three months. If they can't do it, then we will implement our immigration law and do it ourselves."

Thirteen Montagnards who did receive refugee status, meanwhile, will not be allowed to settle in Cambodia, he said.

"We asked the UNHCR to find a third country for them to resettle."

The UNHCR could not be reached for comment, but on Sept. 13 spokeswoman Vivian Tan told The Phnom Penh Post that the agency had received assurance from Vietnam that "it will not discriminate against or punish them."

An estimated 200 Montagnards have entered Cambodia during the past year, crossing through border jungles to flee an oppressive Vietnam. In recent months, a number have willingly returned to Vietnam after failing to secure refugee status, but the mass repatriation raises questions of whether their safety can be guaranteed.

They fled because their "rights were restricted," said Sourn Butmao, executive director of the Phnom Penh-based Minority Rights Organization. "I'm wondering how can Vietnam treat them well?"

In June, Human Rights Watch released a broad report on Vietnam's treatment of Montagnards, highlighting "systematic" persecution of the minority.

Among the oppressive policies was "arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment," the report noted.

Repatriation

Cambodia has come under fire for its treatment of asylum seekers over the years. In 2002, the country repatriated more than 1,000 Montagnards who had fled after Vietnam violently cracked down on protests over mistreatment.

Then, as now, the U.N. facilitated the return — insisting the repatriation was voluntary and their safety ensured even as persecution changed little in subsequent years. In 2009, at the urging of the Chinese government, Cambodia deported 20 Uighur asylum seekers including two babies. At least two of them received life sentences upon return while the fate of the others was never revealed.

Butmao told ucanews.com that the latest repatriation was doubtless political, noting that the government had simultaneously agreed to resettle more refugees from Australia's offshore detention center on Nauru.

Last week, Prime Minister Hun Sen met with Australian Immigration Minister Peter Dutton and promised to take additional refugees amid reports that Cambodia was closing its doors after receiving just four refugees.

Cambodia received A\$55 million (US\$38 million) in aid and support after inking a controversial refugee resettlement deal that appears to have fallen apart just three months in. Earlier this month, a Rohingya refugee who was one of the four requested to be sent back to Myanmar. Thus far, not a single other refugee has agreed to be moved to Cambodia.

"After the four were sent to Cambodia there was an intensive effort [to move more.] I can't overstate that. People were cold-called, even medical interviews were turned into discussions about why they should go to Cambodia," said Ian Rintoul of the Sydney-based Refugee Action Coalition. No one, however, has signed on, he added.
