

NATIONAL

Heroin Disguised as Health Tonic Intercepted at Post Office

BY SAING SOENTHRITH
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Two people were arrested in Phnom Penh on Friday for trying to post almost 25 kg of a substance containing heroin—hidden in sachets labeled as a popular South Korean health tonic—to Australia.

In a case that bears a striking resemblance to a large haul of heroin posted from Cambodia to Australia and intercepted by authorities there in April, postal and customs officials at Phnom Penh's main post office seized 600 sachets of the substance, Minister of Post and Telecommunications So Khun said yesterday.

Mr. Khun said officials confiscated a package addressed to Australia that they thought was suspicious at about 9:30 a.m. on Friday.

"We confiscated one box of packets branded 'Korean Red Ginseng Tonic' mailed to Australia. We didn't know why they would

be mailing these ingredients to Australia," he said.

"Later, we invited anti-drug police to analyze it and they found that it contained heroin."

Cambodian Sou Sarith, 54, a soldier, and a Vietnamese woman named Nguyen Nuhanh, 44, were arrested over the shipment, Mr. Khun said, adding that officials were cooperating with Australian authorities on the case.

Meas Vyrih, deputy secretary-general of the National Authority for Combating Drugs, said that 24.67 kg of the fluid substance was found, estimating that it contained about 12 kg of pure heroin.

Brigadier General Ouk Hay Seila, transnational crime bureau chief at the Ministry of Interior's internal security department, said that the two suspects were in the ministry's custody and would be sent to court to be charged today.

In April, two Cambodians were arrested and charged in Mel-

bourne, Australia, over about 65 kg of a substance containing heroin—which was disguised in hair dye sachets adorned with an image of a ginseng root.

In that case, a total of five packages recorded as "tea" were sent through the post office in Phnom Penh, but were only intercepted upon their arrival in Australia.

Mr. Khun, the minister, said yesterday it was not uncommon for the post office to find small amounts of heroin in parcels bound for overseas. "But this time, it is a big amount of heroin," he said.

According to a report this month by the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, only 2.4 kg and 2.1 kg of heroin were interdicted in Cambodia in 2010 and 2011, respectively.

Although little is intercepted in Cambodia, heroin grown in the Golden Triangle region is thought to be smuggled across the Lao-Cambodian border and shipped abroad from Phnom Penh.

In a separate action by police in Phnom Penh yesterday, anti-drug officers arrested two Cambodians and two Lao nationals at about 2:30 p.m. and seized roughly 20,000 methamphetamine pills, said In Song, deputy chief of the processing unit at the Interior Ministry's anti-drug police department.

The Cambodians were caught with the pills in their room at the Bolina Palace hotel in Daun Penh district's Phsar Thmei III commune, he said. The Lao nationals, the alleged ringleaders, were arrested at the Phka Meas guesthouse in Russei Keo district's Prek Liep commune, Mr. Song said.

"They confessed to smuggling the 20,000 methamphetamine pills from the Lao border at Preah Vihear province," Mr. Song said.

"All of them are in anti-drug police custody at the Ministry of Interior for questioning."

(Additional reporting by Simon Lewis)

Rights Worker Reiterates His Innocence Before Court Appearance

BY KHUON NARIM
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THE CAMBODIA DAILY

On the eve of his appearance at the Phnom Penh Municipal Court, Chan Soveth, a prominent investigator for local human rights group Adhoc, said yesterday that he has committed no wrongdoing in performing his job.

"I am going to appear in court tomorrow for the court's questioning," Mr. Soveth said. "It is the court's discretion [to charge and question me]. We are common citizens who have an obligation to

obey the law. But I didn't commit what they charged me with."

The court has charged Mr. Soveth with "providing assistance to a perpetrator" over his alleged role in a so-called secessionist movement in Kratie province's Broma village in May. Locals involved in the movement have said they were merely attempting to prevent the confiscation of their farmland by a private rubber company.

Mr. Soveth's lawyers last week confirmed that the criminal charge lodged against their client by the government is linked to the al-

leged secessionist movement.

Investigating judge Chhe Vi-reak could not be reached for comment yesterday. But human rights workers threw their support behind Mr. Soveth and expressed concern over the political nature of his summons.

"We can say that Soveth's case is one way to measure the situation for human rights defenders," said Ny Chakrya, Adhoc's chief investigator, adding that he wanted to wait for the court's decision on Mr. Soveth's case before commenting further.

Mr. Soveth's case is just another attempt to muzzle voices critical of the government, said Naly Pilorge, director of local rights group Licadho, who pointed to the case of two land activists from the Boeng Kak and Borei Keila communities who will also face trial on Wednesday.

"This week is going to be tough, but it's also going to be a test whether this court can really operate on its own independence and whether it can weigh on facts versus what the executive branch wants them to do," Ms. Pilorge said.

World Bank Tight-Lipped on Resumption of Financial Assistance

BY SIMON LEWIS
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THE CAMBODIA DAILY

The World Bank has declined to say whether it will resume providing financial assistance to Cambodia, despite a bank official allegedly telling anti-eviction protesters last week that the organization planned to do so next year.

In August 2011, World Bank country director for Southeast Asia Annette Dixon said new lending to the government had been frozen since December 2010, and would not be resumed "until an agreement is reached with the residents of Boeng Kak lake."

The freezing of funds followed a World Bank "Inspection Panel" ombudsman review that found that the government's selective issuing of land titles—a project funded by the World Bank—had

deprived Boeng Kak residents of their property rights.

Seven representatives of the Boeng Kak community met with World Bank country manager Alasane Sow on Thursday in Phnom Penh and reported that he told them the Bank had plans to start granting new loans to Cambodia.

Boeng Kak community representative Tep Vanny said the Boeng Kak case was not yet solved and, therefore, the World Bank should not resume its funding to the government.

"We will protest if the World Bank quietly provides loans" to the government, she said. "Aid from the World Bank has forced many families from their homes."

In response to questions about the meeting and the Bank's reported resumption of funding to the government, World Bank commu-

nications officer Bou Saroeun would only refer a reporter to material on the Bank's website, which, he said, "reflects our position."

In an opinion piece posted on the Bank's website on December 7, Pamela Cox, the World Bank vice president for East Asia and the Pacific, made no mention of the funding freeze to the government, but said the bank "is able and ready to assist, inspire and inform Cambodia's efforts to achieve its development goals."

Boeng Kak residents who met with Mr. Sow on Thursday said that the Bank's country manager had told them the government had given the World Bank assurances that all lake residents of their community had been compensated for the eviction.

But the residents and human rights groups say roughly 60 fami-

lies are still without compensation or land titles, on top of the roughly 3,500 families already forcibly evicted from Boeng Kak to clear land for a construction company owned by a senator from Prime Minister Hun Sen's ruling CPP.

"This is not about generic land disputes," David Pred, managing associate at Inclusive Development International, said of the World Bank's vague response regarding its resumption of funding to the government.

"It's about mandatory World Bank safeguards policies and the Cambodian government's contractual obligations to respect them," he said.

Mr. Pred added that World Bank President Jim Yong Kim—who replaced Robert Zoellick in the position in July—should continue the bank's stance on Cambodia.