



**Congressional
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Cambodia: Background and U.S. Relations

November 16, 2022

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R47311



Cambodia: Background and U.S. Relations

R47311

November 16, 2022

Thomas Lum
Specialist in Asian Affairs

The United States was a party to the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement that formally ended the 1979-1991 civil war in Cambodia, and has long had an interest in supporting democratic development in the country. Between 1993, when Cambodia's first post-war elections were held, and 2017, when the government banned the main opposition party, the conduct of elections improved and civil society grew, although Prime Minister Hun Sen often ruled in ways observers viewed as undemocratic. As bilateral relations improved in the late-2000s, U.S. engagement with Cambodia expanded, and it has included foreign assistance programs, limited military assistance and cooperation, and recovery efforts for U.S. missing-in-action (MIA) from the Vietnam War.

U.S. relations with Cambodia have become strained in the past decade in light of the Cambodian government's suppression of the political opposition and its growing embrace of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the years leading up to the 2018 national election, the Cambodian government placed increasing restrictions on political and social activism, civil society, free speech, and foreign-funded democracy programs. In November 2017, the Supreme Court of Cambodia issued a ruling that dissolved the main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, for "conspiring with the United States to overthrow the government."

The U.S. government has sought to remain engaged with Cambodia in some areas while calling on Hun Sen to respect human rights and restore democratic elections, placing some restrictions on development assistance, suspending military assistance, and sanctioning some Cambodian officials for corruption or human rights violations. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-103, Section 7043(b)) prohibits assistance to the government of Cambodia unless the Secretary of State certifies that Cambodia is taking effective steps to assert its sovereignty against interference by the PRC, including by verifiably maintaining the neutrality of Ream Naval Base; cease violence, threats, and harassment against civil society and the political opposition; and respect the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities enshrined in the 1993 Constitution of Cambodia, among other provisions.

The United States allocated \$100.5 million in foreign assistance to Cambodia in FY2022. Major program areas include preventing child and maternal death and combating infectious disease threats, advancing human rights and democracy, promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, improving natural resources management, and combating human trafficking. The U.S. government also provides assistance for unexploded ordnance (UXO) removal and related programs in Cambodia, which is among the countries most heavily affected by UXO, including that left from U.S. bombing during the Vietnam War.

Since the early 1990s, Cambodia, one of the poorest countries in East Asia, has made significant progress on some socioeconomic indicators, although poverty and malnutrition in rural areas persist. The kingdom's economy, which was largely destroyed by the Communist Party of Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979) and subsequent conflicts, achieved an average annual growth rate of 8% between 1998 and 2019, largely driven by foreign investment and the development of the agricultural, garment, construction, real estate, and tourism sectors. The United States is Cambodia's largest export market, of which garments and footwear are the main items.

China's economic largesse in Cambodia appears to have contributed to Hun Sen's support for China internationally and domestically. Observers have called Cambodia the Southeast Asian country upon which China exerts the greatest influence. China reportedly has begun construction activities at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base on the Gulf of Thailand, although PRC and Cambodian officials have denied that they are for exclusive use by China's People's Liberation Army. A PRC entity is building one of Cambodia's largest development projects, a \$3.8 billion deep-water port, factories, and tourist facilities near the town of Sihanoukville. PRC construction activities also include a nearby international airport at Dara Sakor that some analysts believe could be used for military as well as civilian purposes.

Contents

U.S.-Cambodia Relations: Overview	1
U.S. Interests	1
Policy Tools.....	2
Pending Legislation	3
Congressional Considerations.....	3
Cambodian Politics.....	4
Restrictions on Civil Society.....	6
Cambodian Economy	8
U.S. and Other Foreign Assistance.....	9
Cambodia and China	11
Economic Engagement.....	11
Military Relations.....	12
Ream Naval Base.....	12
Hydropower Projects.....	13

Figures

Figure 1. Cambodia at a Glance	5
--------------------------------------	---

Contacts

Author Information.....	15
-------------------------	----

U.S.-Cambodia Relations: Overview

U.S. relations with the Kingdom of Cambodia have grown strained over the last decade, as Prime Minister Hun Sen has generated and responded to growing domestic and international criticism by restricting civil and political rights, banning the political opposition in 2017, and increasingly embracing the People’s Republic of China (PRC).¹ The U.S. government has sought to remain engaged with Cambodia while calling on Hun Sen to restore political rights to opposition politicians, providing support to Cambodian civil society, and applying pressure through sanctions on Cambodian officials and some restrictions on development and military assistance. Areas of U.S. engagement include education, public health, food security, law enforcement, countering trafficking in persons, demining, U.S. POW/MIA accounting, nonproliferation, addressing climate change, natural resource management, and peacekeeping.²

In 2017, the Cambodian government suspended Angkor Sentinel, an annual bilateral military exercise launched in 2010 that focused on international peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and military-to-military cooperation. Some observers interpreted the unilateral action as a sign that Hun Sen was distancing Cambodia from the United States as the U.S. government was becoming more critical of his policies.³ In June 2021, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Cambodia, where she urged the Cambodian government to respect human rights and maintain an independent foreign policy. Sherman “expressed serious concerns about the PRC’s military presence and construction of facilities at Ream Naval Base on the Gulf of Thailand.”⁴ In August 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Hun Sen in Phnom Penh and urged the Prime Minister to release political activists, “make progress on democracy,” and be “fully transparent” about PRC activities at Ream Naval Base.⁵ President Joe Biden met with Hun Sen, the 2022 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Chair, in November 2022 in Phnom Penh. Biden pressed the Cambodian leader to release political activists, including U.S.-Cambodian dual citizen Seng Theary, and to “reopen civic and political space” ahead of the 2023 elections, and expressed concerns about Ream Naval Base.⁶

U.S. Interests

The United States has sought to influence Cambodia’s political development, including as a party to the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement that formally ended over two decades of armed conflict in Cambodia and, with the help of the United Nations,⁷ helped establish Cambodian democratic institutions. Given China’s growing economic and strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific, U.S. policies that help strengthen Cambodia’s economy while providing disincentives for Cambodia to align with China also support U.S. interests. The U.S. government has aimed to support these

¹ For brief background on Cambodia, see CRS In Focus IF10238, *Cambodia*, by Thomas Lum.

² Department of State, “U.S. Relations with Cambodia,” fact sheet, June 16, 2021.

³ “Cambodia’s Decision to Nix Military Exercises with US Leaves Many Scratching Their Heads,” *Southeast Asia Globe*, January 19, 2017; Angkor Sentinel, *GlobalSecurity.org*, at <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/angkor-sentinel.htm>.

⁴ Department of State, “Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman’s Visit to Cambodia,” media note, June 1, 2021.

⁵ Department of State, “Secretary Blinken’s Meeting with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen,” readout, August 4, 2022.

⁶ The White House, “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Meeting with Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia,” November 12, 2022.

⁷ United Nations, “Cambodia—20 Years on from the Paris Peace Agreements,” October 21, 2011.

objectives through development assistance, trade ties, and limited engagement with Cambodian military and security services.⁸

Policy Tools

Congress periodically has imposed conditions upon some U.S. assistance to Cambodia in order to promote democracy and human rights in the kingdom. From 1998 to 2007, Congress prohibited government-to-government assistance to Cambodia to pressure Hun Sen’s government to fully institute democracy, but allowed U.S. assistance to NGOs and some humanitarian programs to continue. Congress lifted the ban in 2007 due in part to then-improving democratic processes, although most U.S. assistance efforts in Cambodia have continued to be channeled through NGOs.

Since 2017, State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations (SFOPS) legislation have placed conditions upon some U.S. assistance to Cambodia relating to human rights and regional security concerns. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-103, Section 7043(b)) prohibits assistance to the government of Cambodia unless the Secretary of State certifies that Cambodia is taking effective steps to assert its sovereignty against interference by the PRC, including by verifiably maintaining the neutrality of Ream Naval Base; cease violence, threats, and harassment against civil society and the political opposition in Cambodia; and respect the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities enshrined in the 1993 Constitution of Cambodia, among other provisions. The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act also imposed democracy-related and other conditions upon U.S. assistance to the government of Cambodia.⁹

In 2018, the U.S. government suspended International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs in Cambodia in response to the government’s suppression of the political opposition.¹⁰ Prior to the suspension, IMET programs had aimed to “help Cambodia’s military become better equipped to address transnational and global threats, support and sustain democratic institutions, respond to humanitarian crises, and ensure the safety of U.S. citizens visiting or living in Cambodia.”¹¹ Relatedly, in December 2021, the Department of Commerce and the Department of State imposed export controls on U.S. national security-controlled items and arms to Cambodia.¹²

The U.S. government has sanctioned five Cambodian officials since 2018, and in some cases members of their immediate families, for corruption or human rights abuses pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13818, which implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act; three of the five Cambodian officials were also sanctioned under the SFOPS Section 7031(c) visa restrictions authority. Specifically, the U.S. government sanctioned four officials for corruption and one official, General Hing Bun Hieng, commander of Hun Sen’s bodyguard unit, “for being the leader of an entity involved in serious human rights abuse.”¹³ In

⁸ Department of State, “Integrated Country Strategy: Cambodia,” March 22, 2022.

⁹ P.L. 115-409, Title II, §201(b).

¹⁰ The White House, “Statement from the Press Secretary on Reduction in Assistance to the Government of Cambodia,” February 27, 2018. The suspension is still in effect.

¹¹ Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification, Foreign Operations, Appendix 2, FY2017*.

¹² U.S. Department of Commerce, “Commerce Adds Export Controls on Cambodia to Address Corruption, Human Rights Abuses, and Regional Security Concerns,” December 9, 2021; “Revision of Controls for Cambodia Under the Export Administration Regulations,” *Federal Register*, December 9, 2021; “International Traffic in Arms Regulations: Addition of Cambodia to List of Proscribed Countries,” *Federal Register*, December 9, 2021.

¹³ Department of the Treasury, “Designations Represent Latest Efforts to Isolate Serious Human Rights Abusers and Corrupt Actors from the US. Financial System,” June 12, 2018; Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Corruption and Material Support Networks,” December 9, 2019; Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Targets

addition, in 2020, the U.S. government sanctioned a PRC company in Cambodia, Union Development Group (UDG), pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Act. The Treasury Department stated that China “has used UDG’s projects in Cambodia to advance PRC ambitions to project power globally,” that UDG activities were damaging the environment and hurting the livelihoods of local communities, and that its infrastructure development at Dara Sakor that “could be converted to host military assets.”¹⁴

Pending Legislation

The Cambodia Democracy Act of 2021 (H.R. 4686) and the Cambodia Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2022 (S. 3052), introduced in the 117th Congress, would impose sanctions on senior Cambodian officials who the President has determined have directly and substantially undermined democracy in the country or engaged in serious human rights abuses.¹⁵

Congressional Considerations

Some policy experts advocate imposing visa and economic sanctions on Cambodian officials to pressure Hun Sen into reversing his suppression of democracy.¹⁶ Congress may consider the pros and cons of supporting sanctions on additional Cambodian officials as well as further restricting foreign assistance to the kingdom. Congress may also consider potential costs and benefits of imposing trade sanctions, such as suspending preferential trade treatment or eligibility for the U.S. Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program.¹⁷ In the 116th Congress, Senator Cruz and Representative Lowenthal introduced the Cambodia Trade Act of 2019 (S. 34 and H.R. 1376, respectively), which would have required a report on the participation of Cambodia in the GSP program, and whether it should be withdrawn. In 2020, the European Union (EU) partially suspended trade preferences for Cambodia citing human rights concerns; the suspension affected 20% of Cambodian exports to the EU.¹⁸

Some analysts have questioned the effectiveness of EU trade sanctions in obtaining desired political outcomes.¹⁹ Some suggest that U.S. punitive actions may encourage Cambodia to seek even closer relations with China.²⁰ Furthermore, some state that trade penalties would hurt average Cambodians, particularly garment workers and their families.²¹

Corrupt Military Officials in Cambodia,” November 10, 2021.

¹⁴ Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Chinese Entity in Cambodia Under Global Magnitsky Authority,” September 15, 2020.

¹⁵ H.R. 4686 passed in the House on September 28, 2021.

¹⁶ Claudio Francavilla, “EU Should Sanction Cambodia’s ‘Dirty Dozen,’” Human Rights Watch, March 15, 2021; Olivia Enos, “Holding Cambodia Accountable for Its Descent into One-Party Rule,” *The Heritage Foundation Issue Brief No. 4894*, August 7, 2018. See also House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, “Cambodia’s Descent: Policies to Support Democracy and Human Rights in Cambodia,” December 12, 2017.

¹⁷ The GSP program grants duty-free treatment on some Cambodian exports to the United States. In general, the GSP program includes Cambodian export items such as handbags and travel goods but excludes textiles and apparel.

¹⁸ European Commission, “Cambodia Loses Duty-Free Access to the EU Market over Human Rights Concerns,” August 12, 2020.

¹⁹ David Hutt, “Do EU Sanctions on Cambodia Still Matter?” *The Diplomat*, July 3, 2020.

²⁰ Sebastian Strangio, “US House of Representatives Passes Cambodia Sanctions Bill,” *The Diplomat*, September 30, 2021; Tomoya Onishi, “Cambodia Drawn Ever Closer to China a Year after EU Sanctions,” *Nikkei Asia*, August 13, 2021.

²¹ Gregory Poling and Charles Dunst, “Pariah or Partner? Clarifying the U.S. Approach to Cambodia,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, June 14, 2022; Kongkea Chhoeun, “Should Western Countries Impose Sanctions on

Some experts argue that greater U.S. engagement would help further U.S. interests by garnering influence, soft power, or goodwill. The Cambodian leader reportedly has welcomed U.S. investment, and likely seeks some balance to China's influence.²² Others add that the United States could further its aims in Cambodia through expanded and well-publicized U.S. development assistance, greater funding for Khmer language Voice of America and Radio Free Asia broadcasting, and public diplomacy efforts.²³ According to some observers, Cambodian civil society, independent journalists, and democratic-minded urban youth would be particularly receptive to greater U.S. engagement.²⁴ Some analysts suggest that offers of greater foreign assistance are unlikely to compel political concessions from Hun Sen, and that "the most effective pressure may end up coming from below."²⁵ Congress may consider the pros and cons of supporting various kinds of engagement, much of which might be funded through SFOPS legislation.

Cambodian Politics

Hun Sen has been the nation's leader for 37 years, including as Premier of the Vietnam-backed Republic of Kampuchea between 1985 and 1993. He has headed the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and served as Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia since 1993, including during a period of "co-premiership."²⁶ In December 2021, the CPP reportedly endorsed West Point graduate Hun Manet, the eldest son of Hun Sen, as his successor.²⁷ The King of Cambodia, a largely symbolic figure, is head of state.²⁸ The current King of Cambodia, Norodom Sihamoni, succeeded his father, Norodom Sihanouk, in 2004.

Between 1993, when the United Nations administered national elections pursuant to the 1991 Paris Agreement, and 2017, democratic institutions and practices had gradually evolved to allow widespread civic and political participation, and Cambodia developed a vibrant civil society and a relatively free print media. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Hun Sen and the CPP employed a variety of means to stay in power, including through electoral victories; legal and extralegal political maneuvers; influence over the judiciary, broadcast media, and labor unions; patronage; cronyism; and intimidation.²⁹

Cambodia?" *Asia Times*, September 14, 2017.

²² "Cambodia Hails US Ties, Seeks Relief on China-Linked Sanctions," *Bloomberg*, May 26, 2022; Chanoutdam, "PM Hun Sen Supports US Investment in Cambodia," *Eacnews.asia*, May 5, 2022; Sao Phal Niseiy, "US Engagement with Cambodia Needs to Move Beyond the 'China Factor'," *The Diplomat*, June 4, 2021; Charles Dunst, "Hun Sen, Marcos, and the Anatomy of an American Smile," Center for Strategic & International Studies, August 18, 2022.

²³ Gregory Poling and Charles Dunst, "Pariah or Partner? Clarifying the U.S. Approach to Cambodia."

²⁴ *Ibid.*; Sao Phal Niseiy, "US Engagement with Cambodia Needs to Move Beyond the 'China Factor';" Prak Chan Thul, "U.S. Turns to Music in Bid to Woo Cambodians," *Reuters*, March 7, 2018; Julia Wallace, "As Demographics in Cambodia Shift, Youth Seek Political Change," *New York Times*, February 17, 2016.

²⁵ Sebastian Strangio, "Cambodia Becomes the World's Newest One-Party State," *Foreign Policy*, November 17, 2017.

²⁶ Hun Sen and Norodom Ranariddh, second son of former King Norodom Sihanouk, served as co-premiers between 1993 and 1997 as part of a power sharing agreement between the CPP and the FUNCINPEC Party (*Front Uni National Pour Un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique Et Coopératif*).

²⁷ Sorn Sarath, "CPP Officially Backs Hun Manet to be Next Prime Minister," *Cambodia Journalists Alliance Association News*, December 24, 2021; Rebecca Root, "Who is Hun Manet? PM's Son Anointed as Cambodia's Next Leader?" *The Guardian*, December 28, 2021.

²⁸ Embassy of Cambodia in the United States, "Monarchy," at <https://www.embassyofcambodiadc.org/monarchy.html>.

²⁹ Sebastian Strangio, "In Cambodia, Everything Is Different but Nothing Has Changed," *Asian Review*, October 31, 2016; Sebastian Strangio, "The House That Hun Sen Built," *Foreign Policy*, January 13, 2015.

Figure I. Cambodia at a Glance



Area: 69,898 sq. miles (about the size of Missouri)

Capital: Phnom Penh

Population: 16.7 million (2022 est.)

Government: Parliamentary under a constitutional monarchy

Economic Sectors: (percentage of GDP): agriculture (25); industry (33); services (42) (2017)

Life Expectancy: 70.6 years (2022)

Religion: Theravada Buddhism (95% of population)

Literacy: 80% (2015)

GDP per capita: \$4,200 (purchasing power parity) (2020)

Source: Map created by CRS. Fact information from CIA, *The World Factbook*, June 16, 2022.

The Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), a union of two opposition parties—one led by Sam Rainsy, a long-time opposition leader, and the other fronted by politician and human rights activist Kem Sokha—made significant gains in the 2013 parliamentary election and 2017 local elections for commune councilors. Some experts reported fewer irregularities in 2017 compared to previous elections, crediting in part financial and technical assistance from Japan and the EU that focused on improvements in the voter registration system.³⁰ The CNRP's growing electoral strength reflected the will of a younger and more globalized electorate that was less focused on Cambodia's past turbulence, more concerned about corruption and inequality, and more demanding about government accountability and performance, according to some observers.³¹

In November 2017, the Supreme Court of Cambodia, allegedly at the behest of the government, issued a ruling that dissolved the CNRP for “conspiring with the United States to overthrow the

³⁰ Ben Sokhean, “NEC Releases Official June 4 Election Results,” *Cambodia Daily*, June 26, 2017; “Cambodia: Commune Elections Not Free or Fair,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 12, 2017.

³¹ See, for example, Julia Wallace, “As Demographics in Cambodia Shift, Youth Seek Political Change,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2016.

government.”³² Then-U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia William Heidt stated that Hun Sen’s accusations that the United States was attempting to overthrow the government were “inaccurate, misleading, and baseless.”³³ After banning the CNRP, the government detained Kem Sokha, accusing him of treason for allegedly collaborating with the United States to foment a popular overthrow of the CPP.³⁴ Kem remains confined to his home after the government, facing international pressure, released Kem on bail in 2018. His ongoing trial commenced in January 2020, was suspended due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID–19) pandemic, and resumed in 2022.³⁵

Former CNRP President Sam Rainsy, facing numerous charges that many observers view as politically motivated, lives in self-imposed exile in France.³⁶ Since 2021, Cambodian courts have convicted nearly 90 former CNRP politicians and opposition activists, including Sam Rainsy (in absentia) and Cambodian-American lawyer Seng Theary, of crimes against the state.³⁷ In September 2022, a Cambodian court convened another mass trial of mostly former opposition leaders charged with conspiracy to commit treason.³⁸

Facing a weakened opposition, the CPP won 80% of commune council seats in the June 2022 local elections. The Candlelight Party, founded in 1995 as the Khmer Nation Party and renamed the Sam Rainsy Party in 1997, won 18%.³⁹ The United Nations Human Rights office reported pre-election threats, intimidation, and obstruction, including the imprisonment of some candidates.⁴⁰ The next national parliamentary election is scheduled for July 2023.

Restrictions on Civil Society

The Cambodian government has clamped down on civil society and the media. The National Assembly passed a restrictive new NGO law in 2015, and in 2017 the Cambodian Foreign Ministry used that law to expel the Washington, DC-based National Democratic Institute (NDI),⁴¹ which was engaged in democracy promotion programs in Cambodia, on the grounds that NDI was not registered with the government. Cambodian government media outlets also alleged that NDI, which received financial support through the U.S. Agency for International Development

³² Joshua Berlinger, “Cambodia Court Orders Main Opposition Party to Dissolve,” *CNN*, November 17, 2017; Sebastian Strangio, “Cambodia’s Crumbling Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 14, 2017.

³³ U.S. Embassy, Phnom Penh, “Opening Statement by Ambassador William A. Heidt at a Press Availability,” September 12, 2017.

³⁴ “Statement of the Royal Government on Kem Sokha, who was arrested in “flagrante delicto” by the judiciary police officers in accordance with the Criminal Procedure Code of the Kingdom of Cambodia,” September 3, 2017, at <http://pressocm.gov.kh/en/archives/11871>.

³⁵ “Kem Sokha’s Defence Describes ‘Tense Atmosphere’ at Treason Trial,” *The Star*, June 2, 2022.

³⁶ Luke Hunt, “Counting the Costs of Sam Rainsy’s Failed Return to Cambodia,” *The Diplomat*, November 13, 2019.

³⁷ “Mass Convictions of Opposition Activists in Cambodia,” *VOA*, July 1, 2022; “Court Convicts at Least 51 in CNRP Mass Trial,” Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, June 14, 2022; “Cambodia Convicts Opposition Politicians in ‘Unfair’ Mass Trial,” *Al Jazeera*, March 17, 2022.

³⁸ Sebastian Strangio, “Cambodia Opens Third Mass Trial of Opposition Activists,” *The Diplomat*, September 16, 2022.

³⁹ David Hutt, “Putting a Positive Spin on Cambodia’s Local Election,” *The Diplomat*, June 9, 2022; US-ASEAN Business Council, “Cambodia Analytical Update,” June 7, 2022; Eugene Whong, “Opposition Candlelight Party Gains Steam in Cambodia in Shadow of Crackdown,” *Radio Free Asia*, February 7, 2022.

⁴⁰ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Comment by UN Human Rights Office Spokesperson Liz Throssell on Human Rights Concerns Ahead of Local Elections in Cambodia on Sunday,” June 2, 2022.

⁴¹ NDI is a “core institute” of the National Endowment for Democracy.

(USAID), was involved in a conspiracy involving the CNRP and U.S.-funded NGOs to overthrow the government.⁴²

Roughly 25 human rights NGOs still operate in Cambodia, although they face increasing repression. Cambodian law provides for the right of private-sector workers to form and join independent trade unions, to bargain collectively, and to strike. According to the Department of State, many employers place “severe restrictions” on the formation of unions.⁴³

Modern Political History of Cambodia

The Kingdom of Cambodia became independent from France in 1953. Beginning in 1969, during the Vietnam War, the United States conducted a four-year, sustained, large-scale bombing campaign and incursion into officially neutral Cambodia, aimed at stopping the flow of North Vietnamese soldiers and supplies into South Vietnam. According to some historians, the U.S. bombing helped the Communist Party of Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge) gain followers and military recruits in rural areas. In March 1970, the military forces of pro-American General Lon Nol overthrew the government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in a military coup. A civil war followed, culminating in Lon Nol’s defeat in April 1975 by Khmer Rouge forces and the founding of “Democratic Kampuchea.”

The Khmer Rouge attempted to create an agrarian, communist society, a policy that included the forced depopulation of cities, establishment of rural communes, and executions of many educated and wealthy Cambodians and ethnic minorities. During its brutal three-year reign, roughly 2 million out of a population of 8 million Cambodians died from execution, torture, overwork, starvation, and disease.

In January 1979, Vietnamese forces drove the Khmer Rouge from Phnom Penh. A 13-year internecine war ensued, in which an uneasy coalition of Khmer Rouge, Cambodian nationalists, and royalist insurgents, with assistance from China, fought the Vietnamese-backed Peoples Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge military officer who had defected from the regime in 1977 and fled to Vietnam, served as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the PRK. Following the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989, a United Nations (U.N.)-brokered peace settlement, also known as the Paris Agreement, officially ended the war in October 1991.

In 1993, the United Nations administered elections for a 120-seat Constituent Assembly and Prince Sihanouk returned to Cambodia and was crowned King. For a decade and a half, three major political parties vied for power and influence: the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) under the leadership of Hun Sen; the royalist FUNCINPEC Party, led by Sihanouk’s second son, Norodom Ranariddh; and the eponymous opposition Sam Rainsy Party. After four years of cooperating with FUNCINPEC under a power-sharing agreement, Hun Sen staged an armed takeover of government in 1997. In the face of considerable international pressure and the withholding of foreign aid, Hun Sen held new parliamentary elections in July 1998, which the CPP narrowly won. The CPP and FUNCINPEC again agreed to form a coalition government, with Hun Sen as Prime Minister and Norodom Ranariddh as President of the National Assembly. This uneasy partnership continued until 2006, when Ranariddh was ousted as the leader of FUNCINPEC, which began to decline as a major political force in Cambodia.

In 2004, King Norodom Sihanouk abdicated the throne due to illness and his eldest son, Norodom Sihamoni, succeeded him as King. Norodom Sihanouk died of heart failure, at the age of 89, in Beijing, China, in 2012.

Reporters Without Borders ranked Cambodia 142nd out of 180 countries in its 2022 World Press Freedom Index, down from 132nd in 2017.⁴⁴ The government restricts freedom of expression and the press in various ways, including through defamation lawsuits, criminal prosecutions, and taxation. It also wields control over the media through the approval of permits and licenses for journalists and private media outlets.⁴⁵ Some journalists have been attacked by unknown assailants.⁴⁶ In 2017, the Cambodian government closed more than one dozen radio stations that sold airtime to Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA). RFA, facing political and

⁴² “Ananth Baliga, “Breaking: NDI to Be Shuttered, Foreign Staff Expelled,” *Phnom Penh Post*, August 23, 2017.

⁴³ Department of State, *2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cambodia*, April 12, 2022.

⁴⁴ Reporters Without Borders, “Cambodia,” at <https://rsf.org/en/country/cambodia>.

⁴⁵ Department of State, *2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cambodia*.

⁴⁶ Sun Narin, “More Than 70 Journalists Harassed in Cambodia in 2020, Report Finds,” Voice of America, April 1, 2021.

economic pressure from the government, closed its Phnom Penh office.⁴⁷ Authorities also ordered the English-language *Cambodia Daily*, known as an opposition newspaper, to shut down in 2017, ostensibly for failing to pay taxes. Its publishers stated that the tax charges were illegal and meant to “intimidate and harass” the paper.⁴⁸ According to some observers, the 2018 sale of the *Phnom Penh Post*, a major English language daily, to a Malaysian businessman with ties to Hun Sen, represented a final blow for established independent journalism in the kingdom.⁴⁹

Cambodian Economy

Since the early 1990s, Cambodia, one of the poorest countries in East Asia, has made significant progress on some socioeconomic indicators, although poverty and malnutrition in rural areas persist. The kingdom’s economy, which largely was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979) and subsequent conflicts, achieved an average annual growth rate of 8% between 1998 and 2019, largely driven by foreign investment and the development of the agricultural, garment, construction, real estate, and tourism sectors.⁵⁰ Cambodia’s garment industry, largely run by companies from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, forms a pillar of the nation’s economy, employing roughly 900,000 workers, mostly women.⁵¹ Garments and footwear accounted for 41.2% of Cambodian goods exports in 2021.⁵² In 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected major sectors of the economy, including manufacturing, construction, and tourism. The Economist Intelligence Unit forecasts the economy to recover somewhat and grow by 6% in 2022.⁵³

COVID-19 Situation in Cambodia

As of October 2022, there were 137,979 infections and 3,056 deaths reported in Cambodia since the pandemic began. 87% of the population is fully vaccinated. Principal suppliers of COVID-19 vaccines in Cambodia have been PRC companies (the majority through purchase) and the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) program.⁵⁴

In 2021, the United States surpassed the EU as Cambodia’s largest export market, accounting for 30% of the kingdom’s exports.⁵⁵ In February 2020, the EU partially suspended trade preferences for Cambodia under its “Everything but Arms” (EBA) trade program, citing concerns about political repression and human rights conditions in Cambodia.⁵⁶ Cambodian exports to the United

⁴⁷ Ananth Baliga, Mech Dara and Niem Chheng, “RFA Shuts Down Cambodia Operations amid Media Crackdown,” *Phnom Penh Post*, September 12, 2017.

⁴⁸ Kevin Ponniah, “Cambodia Leader Tells Critics to Pay Up, or Pack Up,” *BBC News*, August 24, 2017.

⁴⁹ “Phnom Penh Post: Firing and Resignations after Sale of Cambodian Daily,” *BBC News*, May 7, 2018.

⁵⁰ World Bank, “The World Bank in Cambodia,” March 29, 2022; Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, June 16, 2022.

⁵¹ Kate Nishimura, “Cambodia Greenlights New Garment Factories Creating 9,500 Jobs,” *Sourcing Journal*, August 6, 2021.

⁵² Economist Intelligence Unit, “Country Report: Cambodia,” July 5, 2022

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ World Health Organization, Cambodia, at <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/kh>; Reuters COVID-19 Tracker at <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/cambodia/>; David Hutt, “China Isn’t the Only Reason for Cambodia’s Vaccination Success,” *The Diplomat*, November 4, 2021.

⁵⁵ World Bank, World Integrated Trade Solution, “Cambodia Trade” (2020); Ou Sokmean and Meng Seavmey, “The United States has been Cambodia’s Biggest Export Market in 2021 Followed by the European Union,” *Cambodianess*, December 30, 2021.

⁵⁶ The suspension affected selected Cambodian garment and footwear products and all travel goods and sugar, amounting to roughly one-fifth of Cambodia’s annual exports to the EU. European Commission, “Trade/Human

States totaled \$7.4 billion in 2021, while imports from the United States totaled \$332 million. The largest export items to the United States in 2021 were apparel and leather goods, and the largest U.S. import items were vehicles.⁵⁷ By comparison, Cambodia's exports to China, its largest trading partner, totaled \$1.5 billion in 2021. Its imports from China, which include fabric for the country's garment industry, totaled \$9.5 billion.⁵⁸ In May 2022, the ASEAN Business Council organized a delegation of U.S. companies to meet with Cambodian officials to discuss expanding U.S.-Cambodian trade and investment ties.⁵⁹

Better Factories Cambodia

Since 2001, the U.S. government has supported an International Labor Organization-led program, *Better Factories Cambodia*, which monitors and works to improve labor practices in the kingdom. The program's funding sources have included USAID, the U.S. Department of Labor, World Bank's International Finance Corporation, Government of Cambodia, Garment Manufacturers' Association in Cambodia, other foreign governments, and international buyers.⁶⁰ The program reportedly covers 78% of Cambodian garment factories that possess licenses for export.

Cambodia acceded to the World Trade Organization in 2004, and is a member of the ASEAN Free Trade Area. Analysts expect Cambodia to benefit from its participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a 2020 trade pact that includes the 10 ASEAN member states and 6 other Indo-Pacific countries, including China.⁶¹ Cambodia signed free trade agreements (FTAs) with China in 2020 and South Korea in 2021.

U.S. and Other Foreign Assistance

Postwar Cambodia has relied heavily on foreign assistance, which accounts for 20%-25% of the Cambodian government's budget.⁶² Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Cambodia from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries and international financial institutions totaled \$1.373 billion in 2020; the largest providers were the Asian Development Bank, Japan, France, the EU, and the United States.⁶³ According to some sources, China, whose assistance is not included in OECD data, is the largest provider of foreign assistance to the kingdom.⁶⁴

Rights: Commission Decides to Partially Withdraw Cambodia's Preferential Access to the EU Market," February 12, 2020; Leonie Kijewski, "EU to Suspend Some of Cambodia Trade Benefits over Human Rights," *Al Jazeera*, February 11, 2020.

⁵⁷ Trade Data Monitor.

⁵⁸ Trade Data Monitor. "Open Development Cambodia: Imports," August 24, 2021.

⁵⁹ "US-ASEAN Business Council Brings Business Delegation to Cambodia during its Chairmanship Year of ASEAN," U.S.-ASEAN Business Council, May 9, 2022.

⁶⁰ Better Work, "Better Factories Cambodia," at <https://betterwork.org/where-we-work/cambodia/>; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, "Better Factories Cambodia," at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/better-factories-cambodia>; Department of State, "The United States-Cambodia Relationship," fact sheet, August 2, 2022.

⁶¹ RCEP took effect in January 2022.

⁶² Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Cambodia."

⁶³ OECD, *Creditor Reporting System*, at <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DataSetCode=CRS1>; OECD, "Aid at a Glance Charts: Cambodia."

⁶⁴ China is not a member of the OECD, and PRC economic assistance often does not meet OECD standards for ODA, due to its large non-concessional loan component, commercial elements, and economic benefits accruing to China. Takehiko Koyanagi, "Aid to Cambodia Tops \$20bn, but 'Democratic Society' Still Far Off," *Nikkei Asian Review*,

The United States allocated \$100.5 million in foreign assistance to Cambodia in FY2022. Major program areas include preventing child and maternal death and combating infectious disease threats, advancing human rights and democracy, promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, improving natural resources management, and combating human trafficking. U.S. assistance also supports reintegration of Cambodian deportees from the United States.⁶⁵ (See textbox, “U.S. Deportations of Cambodians,” below.)

U.S. Deportations of Cambodians

Between 2002, when the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on repatriation, and 2021, over 775 Cambodian nationals who were permanent U.S. residents and who had been convicted of felony crimes were deported to Cambodia. Many of them came to the United States during the 1980s as refugee children, and some had never lived in Cambodia. Many Cambodians subject to deportation have jobs and families in the United States, and many served prison time in the United States for crimes committed during their youth, including minor offenses. Over 200 U.S. residents of Cambodian descent were deported to Cambodia between 2017 and January 2020. The rate of removals dropped sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁶ In 2017, the Department of Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) deemed that the Cambodian government was uncooperative or hindering U.S. deportation efforts, and in violation of its international obligations, and placed Cambodia on a list of “recalcitrant countries.” The U.S. government then imposed limited visa restrictions upon Cambodian Foreign Ministry employees and their families pursuant to Section 243(d) of the Immigration and Nationality Act.⁶⁷

Between 1993 and 2022, the U.S. government contributed approximately \$189.4 million for unexploded ordnance (UXO) removal and disposal, related educational efforts, and survivor assistance programs in Cambodia.⁶⁸ Cambodia is among the countries most heavily contaminated by UXO, including cluster munitions, landmines, and other undetonated weapons left from U.S. bombing during the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978, and civil wars during the 1970s and 1980s.⁶⁹ There were 64,920 known UXO casualties in Cambodia between 1979 and 2020, including 45,123 injured and 19,797 killed.⁷⁰ About half of the land contaminated with UXO has been cleared; most of the remaining land lies in the rural northwest of the country.⁷¹

August 14, 2018.

⁶⁵ Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification, Foreign Operations, Appendix 2, FY2023*; USAID, “Country Narrative: Cambodia,” May 25, 2022.

⁶⁶ Josie Huang, “ICE To Target Cambodian Communities for Deportations Starting This Month,” *LAist*, February 11, 2022; Charles Dunst, “The Trump Administration Just Quietly Deported 25 Cambodian Immigrants,” *Washington Monthly*, January 15, 2020; Ate Hoekstra, “Deported to a Place They Never Considered Home,” *UCA News*, July 10, 2019; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, “ICE Removes 37 Cambodian Nationals,” July 3, 2019; Charles Dunst, “Dozens More Cambodian Immigrants to Be Deported from U.S., Officials Say,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2018.

⁶⁷ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, “Visa Sanctions Against Multiple Countries Pursuant to Section 243(d) of the Immigration and Nationality Act,” August 17, 2022. For further information, see CRS In Focus IF11025, *Immigration: “Recalcitrant” Countries and the Use of Visa Sanctions to Encourage Cooperation with Alien Removals*, by Jill H. Wilson.

⁶⁸ Department of State, *To Walk the Earth in Safety*, 21st Edition, January-December 2021. These activities are carried out largely by U.S. and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), in collaboration with the Cambodian Mine Action Center, a Cambodian NGO, and the Cambodian government. Data for FY2022 is incomplete.

⁶⁹ For further information, see CRS Report R45749, *War Legacy Issues in Southeast Asia: Unexploded Ordnance (UXO)*, coordinated by Michael F. Martin.

⁷⁰ Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, “Cambodia,” updated November 16, 2021.

⁷¹ The Halo Trust, “Cambodia,” at <https://www.halotrust.org/where-we-work/south-asia/cambodia/>.

Human Trafficking

Reported cases of human trafficking nearly doubled in 2021; many of these were victims lured to Cambodia for work.⁷² Cambodia was downgraded to Tier 3 in the Department of State's 2022 assessment, which stated, "The Government of Cambodia does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity."⁷³

Cambodia and China

Observers have called Cambodia the Southeast Asian country upon which China exerts the greatest influence, and China's "most reliable partner in Southeast Asia."⁷⁴ In return for PRC assistance, Cambodia has appeared to accommodate or support China's positions on various issues in the Indo-Pacific, including territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Some experts argue that China's economic engagement has helped reduce U.S. influence in Cambodia and paved the way for greater Chinese military influence in Cambodia and in Southeast Asia more generally. They maintain that China's engagement also has enabled Hun Sen to resist pressure from Western aid donors as well as Cambodians citizens to restore democracy and improve Cambodia's human rights record.⁷⁵ Hun Sen's condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, contrasted with China's position of neutrality, and Cambodia has voted for two U.N. resolutions in support of Ukraine, while China abstained.⁷⁶

Economic Engagement

China is the top foreign investor in Cambodia, followed by Japan and Vietnam, with \$2.32 billion in investment in 2021 (over half of all foreign investment in Cambodia that year).⁷⁷ China is also a major provider of financing and holds 44.3% of the kingdom's foreign debt.⁷⁸ PRC-backed infrastructure and hydropower projects have brought some developmental benefits while also creating environmental problems, raising crime, and causing disruptions and dislocation among some local communities, according to some observers.⁷⁹ A PRC entity is constructing one of Cambodia's largest development projects, a \$3.8 billion deep-water port, factories, and tourist facilities near the town of Sihanoukville on the Gulf of Thailand. The construction activities also

⁷² "Human Trafficking in Cambodia Nearly Doubled in 2021," *Radio Free Asia*, April 7, 2022.

⁷³ Department of State, "2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cambodia," July 2022.

⁷⁴ Philip Heijmans, "China-Backed Dara Sakor Project in Cambodia Rings Alarm Bells in Washington," *Bloomberg*, July 7, 2019.

⁷⁵ David Hutt, "Will the COVID-19 Crisis Spell the End of Cambodia's Hun Sen?" *The Diplomat*, April 2, 2020; Prak Chan Thul and Matthew Tostevin, "China's Big Money Trumps U.S. Influence in Cambodia," *Reuters*, September 11, 2017.

⁷⁶ Shannon Tiezzi, "How Did Asian Countries Vote on the UN's Ukraine Resolution?" *The Diplomat*, March 3, 2022; United Nations, "Ukraine: General Assembly Passes Resolution Demanding Aid Access, by Large Majority," *UN News*, March 24, 2022; Torn Chanritheara, "Cambodia Stands against Russian Annexation of Ukraine's Regions," *Cambodianess*, October 1, 2022; "Cambodia PM Condemns Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 28, 2022.

⁷⁷ Sangeetha Amarthalingam, "China's BRI Beneficial with a Side of Risk?" *Phnom Penh Post*, June 30, 2022; "Chinese Investment in Cambodia Rises in 2021 despite Pandemic," *Xinhua*, March 4, 2022.

⁷⁸ Economist Intelligence Unit, "Country Report: Cambodia."

⁷⁹ Matthias Alfram, "Sihanoukville Pays the Price for Heavy Reliance on Chinese," *Bangkok Post*, May 9, 2022; Kimkong Heng, "Chinese Investment Strains Cambodian Society," *Nikkei Asia*, July 22, 2019; Prak Chan Thul, "Chinese Investment in Cambodian Province Pushes Up Crime Rate, Says Governor," *Reuters*, January 26, 2018.

include an international airport at Dara Sakor, also on the Gulf of Thailand, that some analysts say could be used for military as well as civilian purposes.⁸⁰

Military Relations

The Cambodia-China military relationship includes PRC financing and military assistance, including a pledge of \$100 million in 2018, exchanges, and joint exercises.⁸¹ Since 2016, the two countries have carried out four annual Golden Dragon joint military exercises; Cambodia suspended the event in 2021, citing flooding and the government's ongoing battle with COVID-19. The two sides aim to resume the exercise in 2023.⁸²

Ream Naval Base

Since 2018, U.S. suspicions have grown regarding PRC activities at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base near Sihanoukville.⁸³ Cambodian and Chinese officials have denied the existence of a basing agreement. Hun Sen has emphasized that hosting a foreign military facility would be unconstitutional, although the government may provide access to the port for multiple countries.⁸⁴ Some experts argue that China may want to use Cambodia to project power further from the PRC mainland and to use Ream as a station to service its naval vessels.⁸⁵

A defense attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia attempted to visit Ream naval base in June 2021, but Cambodian authorities denied him full access.⁸⁶ In December 2021, Hun Sen banned U.S. official visits to Ream altogether, ostensibly in response to the U.S. visa and economic sanctions on two Cambodian officials for corruption.⁸⁷ According to reports, China is proceeding with construction activities at Ream, including completed and planned new buildings, renovation of structures, new piers, a slipway and dry dock for repairing vessels, and water and sewage systems.⁸⁸ A PRC official reportedly confirmed that "a portion of the base" would be used by the

⁸⁰ Hannah Beech, "A Jungle Airstrip Stirs Suspicions about China's Plans for Cambodia," *International New York Times*, December 26, 2019. Jeremy Page, Gordon Lubold and Rob Taylor, "Naval Outpost in Cambodia Bolsters China's Ambitions," *Dow Jones Institutional News*, July 22, 2019.

⁸¹ "China-Cambodia Military Relations Reach New High: Defense Spokesperson," *China Military Online*, July 29, 2021; "Cambodian Army Purchased 290 Military Trucks from China," *Global Defence Mart*, June 24, 2020; Keegan Elmer, "China Pledges More Military Aid as Cambodia Prepares for Controversial Election," *South China Morning Post*, June 19, 2018; "China Supplies Cambodia with Anti-Aircraft Hardware in New Military Aid," *Reuters*, November 6, 2015.

⁸² Ben Sokhean, "Cambodia, China Push for 'Golden Dragon' Military Drill," *Khmer Times*, August 18, 2022; "Cambodia Suspends Annual Military Exercises with China," *RFA Khmer Service*, February 11, 2021.

⁸³ Jeremy Page, Gordon Lubold and Rob Taylor, "Naval Outpost in Cambodia Bolsters China's Ambitions," *Wall Street Journal*, July 22, 2019.

⁸⁴ Ankit Panda, "Cambodia's Hun Sen Denies Chinese Naval Base Again—But What's Really Happening?" *The Diplomat*, June 2, 2020.

⁸⁵ Rebecca Ratcliffe, "'Ironclad Brothers': What China Wants from its Role in Cambodia's Biggest Naval Base," *The Guardian*, June 9, 2022; Prashanth Parameswaran, "Why a New China Naval Outpost in Cambodia Would Matter," *The Diplomat*, July 23, 2019; Charles Dell, "Hiding in Plain Sight: Chinese Expansion in Southeast Asia," *War on the Rocks*, May 9, 2019.

⁸⁶ "U.S. Says Denied Full Access to Cambodia Naval Base During Visit," *Reuters*, June 11, 2021.

⁸⁷ Luke Hunt, "Cambodia Bans US Visits to Ream Naval Base after Sanctions," *The Diplomat*, December 6, 2021.

⁸⁸ "Construction at Cambodia's Ream Picks Up Pace," Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative, October 18, 2022; Niharika Mandhana and Chun Han Wong, "China to Upgrade Ream Naval Base in Cambodia, Fueling U.S. Concerns," *Wall Street Journal*, June 8, 2022.

Chinese military, although he denied that it was for exclusive use by the People's Liberation Army.⁸⁹

Khmer Rouge Tribunal

The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC, also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal), an international court established through an agreement between the government of Cambodia and the United Nations, began proceedings in 2006 to try Khmer Rouge leaders and officials responsible for grave violations of national and international law.⁹⁰ The ECCC has been financed through contributions by the Cambodian government along with donations by foreign countries, particularly Japan, both directly to the ECCC and to a U.N.-administered international trust fund. Between 2008 and 2017, the United States provided annual contributions to the international trust fund. In addition, between 2005 and 2017, USAID provided a total of \$9.8 million to the Documentation Center of Cambodia, an archive, library, and public service center focused upon Khmer Rouge atrocities.⁹¹

ECCC prosecutors charged five former Khmer Rouge leaders with crimes against humanity and war crimes. In 2012, "chief executioner" Kaing Guek Eav, who ran the infamous Toul Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, was sentenced to life in prison. Former Foreign Minister Ieng Sary died in March 2013, before the completion of his trial, while his wife, former Minister of Social Affairs Ieng Thirith, was declared mentally unfit for trial. In August 2014, the court sentenced former leaders Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan each to life in prison for crimes against humanity, and in a separate trial in November 2018, each was convicted of additional crimes, including genocide.⁹² Although Cambodian and international human rights groups and the ECCC's international judges advocated prosecuting former mid-ranking Khmer Rouge officials, Hun Sen opposed further indictments, arguing that they would undermine national stability.⁹³ In 2022, the Cambodian National Assembly voted to bring the ECCC to a close, and in September 2022, the court made its final ruling, rejecting an appeal by Khieu Samphan, age 91.⁹⁴

Hydropower Projects

Domestic and regional demand for energy and foreign investment, largely from China, have driven hydropower projects in Cambodia and neighboring countries. PRC firms reportedly have invested over \$2 billion in the construction of seven major dams in Cambodia.⁹⁵ According to some experts, dams on the upper Mekong River in China and unregulated, Chinese-built dams on the Lower Mekong in Laos and Cambodia have caused erratic changes in water levels, environmental degradation and ecological damage, loss of fish stocks, displacement of communities, and adverse effects on livelihoods in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.⁹⁶ Cambodia

⁸⁹ Ellen Nakashima and Cate Cadell, "China Secretly Building Naval Facility in Cambodia, Western Officials Say," *Washington Post*, June 6, 2022.

⁹⁰ The tribunal has 17 Cambodian judges and prosecutors and 10 international judges and prosecutors. As a safeguard against bias, verdicts require a "super-majority"—a simple majority plus the vote of at least one international judge.

⁹¹ "United States Announces New Contribution to Help Preserve Cambodia's Historical Documents," USAID, April 3, 2017.

⁹² Sopheng Cheang, "Cambodia Says Khmer Rouge Tribunal That Convicted 3 Is Done," *Miami Herald*, November 18, 2018.

⁹³ Andrew Nagemson, "Last Khmer Rouge Cases Are in Limbo; Cambodian Judges on an International Tribunal Block a Trial," *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 2020; International Justice Monitor, "Khmer Rouge Tribunal Leaves Unresolved Whether New Case Will Proceed to Trial," January 9, 2020. "Expanding Khmer Rouge Trials Could Spark War: Hun Sen," *The Nation*, February 28, 2015.

⁹⁴ Seth Mydans, "16 Years, 3 Convictions: The Khmer Rouge Trials Come to an End," *New York Times*, September 22, 2022; Lindsey Kennedy and Nathan Southern, "Khmer Rouge Tribunal, Helping Cambodians Heal, Nears End," *Al Jazeera*, April 28, 2022; "Cambodia's War Crimes Tribunal to Close by End of 2022," *Gulf Today*, April 28, 2022.

⁹⁵ "Chinese Investment in Energy Creates New History for Cambodia: Cambodian Minister," *China Daily*, October 11, 2016.

⁹⁶ Brian Eyster, "How China Turned Off the Tap on the Mekong River," Stimson Center, April 13, 2020, updated May

8, 2021, at <https://www.stimson.org/2020/new-evidence-how-china-turned-off-the-mekong-tap/>; Hannah Beech, “‘Our River Was Like a God’: How Dams and China’s Might Imperil the Mekong,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2019; Nyshka Chandran, “Southeast Asia Is Betting on Hydropower, But There Are Risks of Economic Damage,” *CNBC*, August 9, 2018.

relies heavily on the Mekong and Tonle Sap Lake, which the river feeds into, for its food security.⁹⁷ In 2019, a number of issues, including drought and damming of the Mekong, resulted in record-breaking low levels of water, which compounded depleted fisheries and worsening soil conditions.⁹⁸ In March 2020, the Cambodian government announced that hydropower projects along the Mekong would be put on hold for 10 years and that it would pursue alternative sources of energy.⁹⁹

Author Information

Thomas Lum
Specialist in Asian Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.

⁹⁷ Zoe Osbourne, "Mekong Basin's Vanishing Fish Signal Tough Times Ahead in Cambodia," *The Guardian*, December 16, 2019.

⁹⁸ Andrew Nagemson, "Cambodia's Lifeline Threatened as Mekong Recedes to Historic Low," *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2019.

⁹⁹ Prak Chan Thul, "Cambodia Puts Plans for Mainstream Mekong Dams on Hold For 10 Years, Official Says," *Reuters*, March 10, 2020; Tyler Roney, "Mekong Dams Destroy Tonle Sap Lake," *thethirdpole.net*, April 27, 2020; "Southeast Asia's Hydropower Boom Grinds to a Halt as COVID-19 Stalls Projects," *Channel NewsAsia*, April 21, 2020.