

Court Drops Triple Shooting Charge Against Bavet Governor

The Svay Rieng Provincial Court has dropped all charges against the former Bavet City governor who was the chief suspect in the shooting of three female garment workers during a violent protest at a special economic zone in February, court officials said yesterday.

The court, instead, charged Sar Chantha, Bavet City's penal section chief, with the triple shooting, a lawyer for local human rights group Licadho said.

Chhouk Bundith, the former governor, was originally the sole suspect named in an Interior Ministry investigation into the February 20 shooting outside a shoe factory producing shoes for the German sports brand Puma.

"We have dropped the charge against him [Chhouk Bundith] and I don't want to comment on the reason," said Hing Bunchea, the provincial court prosecutor.

"Based on the evidence and the court's investigation, [he] was not involved in causing the wounds of the victims," he said.

Chin Lyda, a lawyer from Licadho representing the three shooting victims, said he had received a court document stating that the charge against Mr. Bundith would be dropped, while a trial will move forward against Mr. Chantha.

Almost six months after the incident, Mr. Chantha had the charge of causing unintentional injury for shooting the three women levied against him in August.

"The resolution file did not mention the reasons for dropping the charge [against Mr. Bundith] and when the trial will be set for the police officer," Mr. Lyda said.

Mr. Chantha, who is still a serving police officer, said he was not surprised that Mr. Bundith was to go free.

"I am not afraid what they charge me with because I did not commit any wrongdoing in this case," he said.

According to witnesses interviewed by human rights groups, Mr. Bundith was alleged to have opened fire at close range on a crowd of workers who were staging a violent protest for higher wages and other allowances.

The court subsequently charged Mr. Bundith with causing unintentional injuries, though police never arrested him.

Kuy Leak, the mother of Bun Chenda—whose lung was pierced by one of the bullets that was fired at the protesters—called the court’s decision an “injustice.”

“It will allow him to continue to shoot whoever he wishes,” Ms. Leak said. “I am in pain and I am not satisfied that the court allows him to go free from the law.”

Jill Tucker, chief technical adviser for the International Labor Organization said it was “a sad day” for garment workers in Cambodia.

“The buyers wrote a letter early on to the [government] encouraging there to be a speedy trial and a fair administration of justice and I think that neither of those have happened in this case and the buyers may very well be disappointed,” she said.

“PUMA as a business does not comment on political or judicial issues,” said Kerstin Neuber, head of Puma’s corporate communications, in an email.

“However, we do hope that the Cambodian government will put all efforts in convicting the guilty perpetrator who committed the crime.”

Immediately after the shooting, the three victims were approached several times by authorities—including people who claimed to represent Deputy Prime Minister Men Sam An—to persuade them not to file a criminal complaint against Mr. Bundith in exchange for gifts and money.

The case has also been riddled with inconsistencies.

In March, Mr. Bunchea, the provincial prosecutor, said that Mr. Bundith had testified to shooting his pistol into the air at the demonstration. But the following day he said Mr. Bundith was simply pointing his gun into the air without shooting any bullets.

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