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CNRP to go ahead with rally plans

Meas Sokchea

THE Cambodia National Rescue Party has been told it will not be allowed to hold its final commune election campaign rally at Phnom Penh's Freedom Park on Friday because it could threaten the safety of Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has his own plans for a campaign march nearby, an opposition official said yesterday.

The claim was disputed, however, by a spokesman for Phnom Penh City Hall, who said no final decision had been made and that authorities would today meet with officials from both the CNRP and Hun Sen's ruling Cambodian People's Party to attempt to find a compromise.

Morn Phalla, head of the CNRP's executive committee for Phnom Penh, said the opposition's request to use the centrally located old Freedom Park for its final push for votes ahead of Sunday's nationwide commune elections had been denied by municipal authorities.

It was also told it could not use Wat Botum Park or Olympic Stadium, two other central locations it had suggested as alternatives, because Hun Sen's rally would also pass through there, Phalla said, adding that the party would ignore City Hall's order.

"The position of the Cambodia National Rescue Party in Phnom Penh is that we keep the same position: We will rally at the old Freedom Park," Phalla said, explaining

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Opposition leader Kem Sokha greets CNRP supporters en route to a campaign rally in Monduliri province yesterday. FACEBOOK

Massive bomb in Kabul kills 80

Emal Haidary

AT LEAST 80 people were killed and hundreds wounded yesterday when a massive truck bomb ripped through Kabul's diplomatic quarter, bringing carnage to the streets of the Afghan capital just days into the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan.

Bodies littered the scene and a towering plume of smoke rose from the highly fortified area, which houses foreign embassies, after the powerful blast in the morning rush hour blew out the windows of missions and residences.

A Western diplomatic source said the vehicle was a water tanker stuffed with more than 1,500 kilograms of explosives and left a 7-metre deep crater at the scene.

Rescue workers were digging bodies from the rubble

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Deployed for the campaign?

CNRP concerned at number of soldiers registering in some communes

Shaun Turton, Niem Cheng and Mech Dara
Kandal and Kampong Speu

WITH the commune election now just days away, Cambodia National Rescue Party candi-

dates in four provinces say they believe their communes have been stacked with soldiers who have enrolled as voters despite not residing in the area and, in some cases, are actively campaigning for the ruling Cambodian People's Party.

In interviews conducted



over the past two weeks, candidates in Kandal, Kampong Speu, Preah Vihear and Takeo provinces said voter lists in their areas were swamped with

outside troops, influxes that in three of the cases appear to be reflected in irregularities with the voter lists themselves.

The CNRP first raised concerns with the National Election Committee about soldiers registering far from their homes or bases in Siem Reap,

Battambang and Preah Vihear provinces last year.

Though the Election Law states anyone registering to cast a vote must "have an address/residence in the commune", the NEC dismissed the

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National

Soldiers deployed for election?

Continued from page 1

party's complaint and, further, ruled troops could register in any commune they were assigned to provide security for on election day, or were based in on a long-term mission.

But with most military commanders also holding high-ranking positions within the CPP, the CNRP called the NEC decision a "loophole" that could be used to swing communes in favour of the ruling party.

This worry has been borne out, according to some candidates, who believe soldiers in their commune will impact the vote through weight of numbers or intimidation.

"Before we thought we could win and get the commune chief seat," said Sok Chhum, the second CNRP candidate for Roka commune in Kandal's Kandal Stung district.

"But people are not confident now; more than 200 soldiers have been sent here."

Roka – where opposition members say there's been an influx of troops from Hun Sen's personal Bodyguard Unit – is among several communes where there are irregularities between the gender balance in the voter lists and the 2015 adult population data from the government's commune data base.

Similar irregularities, which appear to shed some light on large concentrations of troops, also show up in Kampong Speu's Samrong Tong and Preah Vihear's Srayang commune, where hundreds of troops have been recalled to their unit's main headquarters from border bases for the election period.

Meanwhile, huge gender imbalances at polling stations visible in the NEC data also appears to lend credence to claims by local opposition officials that several "soldier only" polling stations have been established near military bases in Phnom Penh, an arrangement that an election monitor said would seriously compromise the soldiers' anonymity and "make them easy to control" (see sidebar).

Takeo province's Ou Saray commune, in Tram Kak district, has also received an influx of soldiers, according to CNRP commune chief candidate Soeung Ngorn, who said he was "concerned" after 447 soldiers, including 287 nonresident troops, registered as voters in the electorate.

The voting list discrepancies raise more questions about the neutrality of the military, following weeks of bellicose rhetoric from the leaders of the Kingdom's security forces, including a warning to opposi-

tion protesters who challenge the election's outcome by Defence Minister Tea Banh.

"When they lose the election, but refuse to accept and come demanding this and that, we will not allow it," he said last month. "They will be beaten until their teeth come out."

Roka commune

Roka commune and its half a dozen or so villages sit among small lakes and lush rice fields dotted with sugar palms.

It is an area where the CPP's winning margin eroded during the 2013 national election, when the CNRP came within 263 ballots of winning the commune's popular vote.

It should be a prime target for the CNRP this Sunday. But the opposition's commune chief candidate for the area, Ek Pha, has lost his optimism.

"In the whole commune they send maybe 260 soldiers in order to make sure they win the [commune council chief] seat," said Pha, who is also a deputy commune chief.

Pha and his local opposition colleagues say the soldiers come from the Prime Minister's Bodyguard Unit, which has a training facility in neighbouring Daeum Rues commune – also the native home of the unit's commander, Hing Bun Heang, a central committee member of the CPP.

They turned up in small groups during the voter registration period late last year and quickly received residency paperwork stating they were from the commune's Run village, said CNRP activist Sos Sokon.

"Some were in uniform, some were not," said Sokon, speaking from his home near the commune office.

"They were brought to the CPP headquarters where they changed into normal clothes."

The influx of soldiers shows up on the NEC voter list. It shows 331 people are registered as voters in Run, 250 of whom are male.

According to Bun Vorn, the CPP village deputy chief for Run, the village has just 224 residents, including children.

In an interview at his home, however, Vorn claimed only 10 bodyguards were among the extra registrants, saying the rest were relatives of residents who came from other provinces and wanted to vote in the relatively remote village.

However, Chhum, the second CNRP candidate for Roka, disputed this, saying they knew the men to be bodyguards. "They cannot cheat now. It is clear; we can see the voter lists," Chhum said.

When asked whether soldiers had registered in communes

where they didn't live, Bodyguard Unit Commander Hing Bun Heang called the question "stupid" and said his troops were correctly registered where they were based.

"If the bodyguards are stationed at Kraing Chek, they will vote in Kraing Chek. If they are in Takhmao, they vote in Takhmao. If they're in Phnom Penh, they vote in Phnom Penh ... They vote where they are based," Bun Heang said, admonishing reporters not to rely on accusations from the opposition.

Pha, the CNRP commune chief, disputed this assertion, saying the soldiers had been deployed to campaign on behalf of their commanders, lieutenant generals Pech Sody and Reth Sitha, who were the heads of the CPP working group assigned to win support in the commune. "[The soldiers] come here with their bosses to campaign," he said. "They dress in civilian clothes and walk around in the village to campaign for people to support the CPP."

One local vendor in Run Suon Song who requested anonymity said about 200 soldiers from the CPP working group had registered in the commune and often appeared in the village, out of uniform, to campaign. Nonetheless, he said he wasn't intimidated by the group.

"They mostly just sit and drink beer," he said.

Samrong Tong commune

Campaigning for the opposition in Kampong Speu prov-

“Before we thought we could win and get the commune chief seat. But people are not confident now”

ince's Samrong Tong commune has been a tense experience, according to the CNRP commune chief candidate Hoeurng Som Ngom.

The current deputy commune chief attributes an atmosphere of intimidation, which has led a few of the opposition's ballot box monitors to pull out, to the influx of what he estimates are more than 1,000 soldiers into the area.

"In this commune we are scared, we feel intimidated and weak," he said, adding he was unsure if the party could make further gains at the local level after it increased its share of the vote in 2013. "Before we had soldiers here too, but now more come so they can take both our two seats. Now all the soldiers come [so] they won't miss out on a vote."

The troops belong to the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces' Artillery Unit and have been temporarily recalled from a long deployment on Cambodia's northern border to register in the commune, where the unit's headquarters is located.

This was confirmed by a member of the unit, Sour Samath, who said he arrived back from his Preah Vihear base last week on the orders of his superiors, who he said had recalled the "majority" of the troops.

"Some took taxis, others took trucks, about 100 to 200 soldiers [were transported in] two to three trucks at one time," said Samath, who has been stationed at the northern border



Prime Minister's Bodyguard Unit members march during anniversary celebrations in September last year. Opposition commune council candidates in Kandal fear the voter lists in their communes have been stacked with members of the bodyguard unit that don't reside in the area. HONG MENEHA

base for 10 years, and who said he was not told to guard the polling station.

"We came here to register and to vote. I don't know how many [soldiers came back] ... but the majority. After the election we go back."

Though Samath has a house in the commune, where his wife and children live, many of the soldiers did not, according to a local resident.

"Some [of the soldiers who returned] have houses here and some have houses in other provinces ... [they stay] in the base," said the resident, who requested his name not be used out of fear of retribution from neighbours.

"There are about 10 military families in this village ... but

to polling stations in Siem Reap, which Cambodia's Constitutional Council ruled "unlawful", but deemed it did not influence the final outcome.

Speaking this week, NEC spokesman Hang Puthea reaffirmed the body's position on troop registration, saying the "problem has been solved" by the directive allowing soldiers to register at the stations they are guarding.

And even though the NEC code of conduct and the law that regulates military personnel instruct soldiers to be politically neutral, an updated Election Law, negotiated by both parties following the disputed 2013 election, allows troops and civil servants to campaign off-duty and out of uniform.

Though apparently legal, CNRP lawmaker Mu Sochua said that the current state of play still constituted manipulation of voter lists, and dismissed the idea troops can be considered neutral if they're allowed to campaign when off duty. "We complained but there was nothing we could do to push the NEC to take action," Sochua said, adding she would push for a review of the rules before the 2018 national election.

CPP spokesman Sok Eysan, however, rejected the assertion that the party had registered troops strategically, calling such an assessment biased to the opposition party.

"Before the election, the National Election Committee checked whether they had enough qualifications to vote or not. The [NEC] is not stupid and they know about it," he said. "[The soldiers] can vote where their mission is and this is not wrong."

For Pen Lam, the opposition chief of Srayang commune in Preah Vihear province's Kulen district, the recall of 300 troops from a border base into his constituency was no coincidence. He won the local election in 2012 by just 92 votes. Lam initially refused to register the 300 soldiers, saying he did not recognise them as residents.

He was overruled, however, by the NEC after a complaint by the commander of the men's unit, Brigade 41, whose base is in the region.

"In the previous mandate there were less than 100 soldiers here but when they know that the opposition won, they come to compete for the commune. That's why they put more soldiers," Lam said.

"This is a systematic arrangement."

CNRP alleges soldier-only poll stations

TROOPS from the elite 911 Paratrooper Brigade have been registered at "soldier only" polling stations near their Phnom Penh bases, according to opposition commune candidates running in the communes, claims seemingly backed up by data from the voter list.

In an arrangement that one election monitor said would erode the troops' collective anonymity and right to a secret vote, four stations in the capital's Kambol commune were off-limits to all but 911 soldiers and their families, said Prak Seyha, the CNRP's commune chief candidate in the commune.

"There are about 2,000 soldiers from 911 registered here ... In four voting stations, all of them are soldiers; ordinary citizens were not allowed to register there," Seyha said.

According to the voter list compiled by the NEC last year, four stations in the commune, which encompasses the unit's base, have the highest gender imbalance in the country.

At stations 1764, 1765 and 1766, more than 96 percent of the voters are men. At station 1763, 90 percent of voters are women. One of the units stationed in Kambol is all-female.

In an interview this week, Lieutenant General Chap Pheakdey, commander of the 911 unit, said his soldiers were registered near their base, but denied they had been concentrated at single stations. "It is not only at one place," said Pheakdey, a member of the ruling CPP's central committee. "There are many bases, so where they are based, they will vote at the location."

Meanwhile, in nearby Choam Chao III commune, Va Savoeun, a CNRP candidate for the commune, said a similar arrangement existed for troops from Brigade 70. According to voter list data, there are three stations there where about 70 percent of the voters are male.

Sam Kuntheamy, of election watchdog Nicfec, said soldier-only stations would compromise the soldiers' right to a secret vote, and make them "easy to control".

SHAUN TURTON AND NIEM CHENG



Ek Pha, CNRP commune candidate for Kandal's Roka commune, is photographed outside his house. SHAUN TURTON

National

Soldiers appear to have swung seats

Shaun Turton and Niem Chheng
Siem Reap province

TA SIEM, a remote commune in Siem Reap province, yesterday changed hands from the opposition to the ruling Cambodian People's Party after several hundred soldiers were trucked there from another province to vote.

The troop movements into the area were confirmed by a lieutenant colonel from the Preah Vihear-based Intervention Brigade 9 in an interview in the commune.

"I came here by military truck. There were about 40 people [on each truck], [and] there were 18 trucks," said the soldier, who identified himself as "Sovanara".

The area was among several communes across multiple provinces where the voter lists were swollen by large influxes of nonresident troops, according to interviews conducted yesterday and during the campaign period.

The practice was allowed by the National Election Committee, which permitted soldiers to register and vote in the communes they would be guarding on election day.

This has been criticised as a "loophole" allowing the ruling party to strategically register soldiers to sway the vote in contested communes.

Sovanara said his unit left its



A troop carrier carrying men in civilian clothes on the east of Svay Leu district town on National Road 64.
SHAUN TURTON

base next to the Thai border in Preah Vihear's Choam Ksan district on Saturday to head to Ta Siem's Trapaing Thmor village, which is about 70 kilometres northeast of Siem Reap town.

As polls opened at about 7:30am, the officer, who said he had lived and served in Preah Vihear for almost three decades, pointed out that many of the mostly male crowd at the primary-school-turned-polling station were members of his unit.

He said about 800 soldiers

from the border had arrived in the commune in recent days and more had been sent to neighbouring communes.

"There are more than 2,000 [stationed at the border] but they've got split to Boeung Mealea and other places," he said, referring to another commune in the district.

Though dressed in civilian clothes, the troops' presence was confirmed by four other soldiers speaking from the station, who said they had ar-

rived from the border in Preah Vihear but declined to give their names.

Sovanara said the group had come to "protect" the polling station and would return to the border after the vote. He justified the large number of soldiers needed to protect the station by saying "it's a remote area" and said the trucks used to transport his squad were parked two kilometres away.

The Post later saw four troop carriers nearby. Three were parked behind a villager's home, and another left carrying about a dozen men travelling out of uniform. Reporters also saw two more troop carriers loaded with men on National Road 64, between Ta Siem commune and Svay Leu district town.

Ta Siem fell to the Sam Rainsy Party at the 2012 commune election by a margin of 62 votes out of more than 1,500.

The commune saw a surge of support for the CPP at the following year's national ballot, however, when an additional 1,300 voters cast ballots in the commune. Sovanara said his unit also voted in the commune in 2013.

Speaking in the evening, CNRP candidate and former SRP commune chief for Ta Siem Nhoek Rem confirmed that the opposition had lost the vote in the commune, where he said 753 nonresident soldiers had registered.

"They beat us. They are 660 votes ahead," he said by phone.

"We lost because of soldiers and also because some small parties, which split the vote."

Soum Rin, the CPP candidate for Ta Siem, was unreachable yesterday evening, though earlier in the day he denied any soldiers had voted in the electorate.

"There are no soldiers here, I only see people dressed in civilian clothes," he said by phone.

Trapaing Thmor resident Touch Sitha estimated about 300 soldiers had arrived in the village.

"The young soldiers came to sleep at my house," said Sitha, who lives next to the polling station.

"They have been here three days, including today. They came to vote."

Sitha and other villagers said they weren't intimidated by the troops, but he expressed shock that such a large number of soldiers would get to choose their local representatives and then leave.

"The ones who have cars today, they are not from here, I don't know where they are from," he said.

At a roadside restaurant a kilometre from the polling station, 44-year-old Nuth Vanna said she was surprised at the amount of men casting ballots in the village this morning, though she added she didn't know where they were from.

She declined to say which way she was leaning this morning but also said new infrastructure was important.

"I need a new, smooth road to my farm," Vanna said.

Siem Reap's CNRP Executive Committee Deputy Chief Sok Kimseng said he had also received reports of large numbers of nonresident soldiers voting in neighbouring Varin district. He condemned the practice, which he called an "evil strategy".

"It affects the result of the election because the election doesn't reflect the people's will," Kimseng said.

"People have lost their chance to choose their own representative, because the soldiers come in from other places and they do not really know what those villagers in those areas want, yet they get to vote to choose representative for them."

On its website yesterday, rights group Licadho said it had received "several reports" of movements of off-duty soldiers in military vehicles and disproportionate numbers of

men voting at several polling stations.

Citing reports from locals and observers, the group wrote that some 380 troops from Preah Vihear and Oddar Meanchey had voted at two polling stations in Ta Siem, with 18 trucks – carrying around 30 to 40 troops each – seen in the area.

In Boeung Mealea commune, which is in Svay Leu to the south of Ta Siem, locals reported that 10 minibuses arrived in the early morning and dropped off about 300 men who were not from the area, according to Licadho.

In interviews during the campaign period, CNRP candidates in Kandal province's Roka commune, Kampong Speu's Samrong Tong commune, Preah Vihear's Srayang commune and Takeo's O Saray commune also complained of large numbers of nonresident troops registered in their areas.

Yesterday evening, Ek Pha, CNRP commune chief candidate for Roka commune – where interviews last month suggested more than 200 members of Prime Minister Hun Sen's Bodyguard Unit had registered to vote – said the opposition had been defeated three seats to two.

Pha alleged members of the Bodyguard Unit, dressed in civilian clothes, had threatened some villagers and cajoled others with gifts on the eve of the vote.

In the weeks leading up to the vote, several hundred troops from RCAF's Artillery Unit also returned from their base in Preah Vihear to vote near their unit headquarters in Kampong Speu's Samrong Tong commune, according to a soldier from the unit who spoke to *The Post* during the campaign.

Reached yesterday evening, Hoerng Som Ngom, CNRP chief candidate in that commune, said he also believed a huge influx of troops had damaged his chances, saying the party was trailing heavily.

In Preah Vihear's Srayang commune, however, CNRP candidate and former SRP commune chief for the area Pen Lam said he had won four of the seven seats, despite the recall of 300 soldiers based on the border to his commune.

Reached yesterday evening, Minister of Defence Tea Banh denied soldiers had been mobilised as strategic voters.

"They are also human beings, they have the right to vote," Banh, a member of the CPP's powerful standing committee, said.

Licadho's deputy director of advocacy, Naly Pilorge, however, said the evidence suggested a deliberate ploy.

"The evidence we've seen so far, of large numbers of soldiers registered in contested constituencies, is tangible confirmation that the ruling party – which has direct links to the RCAF through its central committee – is still engaging in electoral misconduct and interference to maintain its grip on power, threatening to use violence if needed," she said.

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Military troop carriers parked near a polling station in Ta Siem commune. A soldier told *The Post* the trucks were used to transport 800 soldiers to the remote electorate to vote. SHAUN TURTON