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Transparency International Cambodia Executive Director Preap Kol, speaks at a press conference where the organisation's corruption report was released yesterday in Phnom Penh. Hong Menea

Kingdom slips in TI's graft index

Thu, 26 January 2017 Andrew Nachemson and Lay Samean

For the fourth year in a row, Transparency International (TI) has rated Cambodia the country perceived as ASEAN's most corrupt, and just ahead of North Korea and Afghanistan for the entire Asia-Pacific region.

The 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index, which scores and ranks 176 countries and territories around the world, was released yesterday, placing Cambodia at 156. Cambodia's score of 21 out of 100 has remained unchanged in three years.

Denmark once again topped the list while Singapore maintained its position as the least corrupt country in Asia.

"Cambodia continues to be perceived as highly corrupt," Preap Kol, executive director of TI Cambodia, said yesterday.

"While Cambodia remains the same, we see a big change in the region," Kol added, noting improvements in the rankings of fellow ASEAN members Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos.

Both Myanmar and Laos were ranked lower than Cambodia in 2012, but have steadily improved. Cambodia's score slipped in the aftermath of the highly contentious 2013 elections, and has since struggled to keep pace with its neighbours.

Kol referenced enormous discrepancies in Cambodia's data on sand exports as a key illustration of rampant corruption.

Of 72.7 million tonnes of sand reported by Singapore to have been imported from Cambodia between 2007 and 2015, nearly 70 million never appeared in the Kingdom's ledgers, raising questions of potential lost fees and taxes.

Pech Pisey, TI's senior director of programs, explained that the rankings are based on information provided by NGOs, private sector actors and members of the media. Among the eight sources used in assessing Cambodia's perceived corruption levels were the World Economic Forum, the World Bank and the Economist Intelligence Unit.

Pisey said the rankings are based on "perceptions" as there "is no such method or institution to know for sure... how much money is lost every year".

TI recommended reforms to the judiciary and the Anti-Corruption Unit and called for swift legislation guaranteeing access to information and protecting whistleblowers.

Norbert Klein, a member of TI Cambodia's board of directors, said corruption in the Kingdom was a "very deep problem".

"Are they not ashamed of anything?" he asked of officials who engage in blatant corruption.

Speaking to *The Post* after the presentation, Klein also brought up the sand-dredging

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because of how deeply entrenched it is. "There's no real obvious, powerful intervention from the top," he added.

Opposition CNRP lawmaker Son Chhay, a vocal critic of government corruption, said he was "not surprised" by the results.

Chhay also blamed the continued corruption on a lack of action by the ruling party and Prime Minister Hun Sen in particular. "The prime minister has all the tools and power to clear up the mess but he doesn't have the will to do so."

CPP lawmaker Chev Kim Heng, a member of the National Assembly's Commission on Investigation and Anti-Corruption, said the government must take this report seriously.

"We will monitor and study this information, because it is the view of all experts," Kim Heng, who was present at the report's release, said.

Government spokesman Phay Siphon, however, offered a distinctly different tack, dismissing the results entirely.

"The government has never valued this score for Cambodia," Siphon said, claiming the organisation was unfairly painting Cambodia in a negative light.

Siphon also denied that the country suffers from severe corruption. "If corruption is an obstacle and it really exists, there would be no investors coming to invest," he said.

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