

Clothing Sellers Urge Calm in Cambodia After Deadly Protests

Welcome to As It Is from VOA Learning English. I'm Mario Ritter in Washington. After a huge strike by clothing workers in Cambodia turned deadly, international clothing sellers are calling for calm. At the same time, activists are calling for the release of detained demonstrators.

Also, we hear about cuts to government price supports in Malaysia and their effect on the economy. Cambodia's labor unrest and Malaysia's budget tightening are next on As It Is.

Big Name Companies Release an Open Letter

Garment workers in Cambodia have gone on strike to demand higher wages. It has been almost two weeks since the strike turned violent. Military forces killed five protesters when they fired into a crowd near the capital, Phnom Penh. Forty others were injured. Steve Ember has this report on the reaction of clothing manufacturers.

Major clothing manufacturers with factories in Cambodia have written an open letter. The letter expressed concern about the recent shootings of factory workers.

Adidas, Gap, H&M, Levi's and Puma were among those that signed the document, dated on January 7th. It was sent to the Cambodian government, manufacturers and labor union leaders.

The seven companies behind the letter say they are responsible for 70 percent of garment orders from Cambodia. The letter said, "We strongly oppose all forms of violence. It is with great concern that we have observed both widespread civil unrest and the government's use of deadly force."

Workers are demanding a doubling of the lowest monthly pay to \$160. The factory owners have rejected this.

Ath Thun is president of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers' Democratic Union. He said the letter was a "credible" form of pressure on the government and unions to negotiate a pay raise for workers. He also suggested that clothing retailers sell their products for higher prices so that factories can pay more to their workers.

Ken Loo is secretary-general of the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia. Last week, he said that factories would consider agreeing to a wage increase if the government orders one.

However, he warned that the factories will move out of the country if strikes continue. Factory owners say the stoppage in work has cost about \$200 million.

Workers say wages of \$80 a month are not enough because of the rising cost of living in Cambodia.

The protests have led to many arrests. Last week, human rights activists called for the release of 23 people detained in the unrest. I'm Steve Ember.

The Malaysian Government Cuts Subsidies

Malaysian officials are cutting price supports on fuel, natural gas and sugar in an effort to get government debt under control. Now, those cuts are being blamed for rising prices across the country. Some critics say officials should instead target government waste. June Simms has the story from reporter Mahi Ramakrishnan in Kuala Lumpur.

The Malaysian government has been spending more money than it collects since the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s. Last year, it took a step to reduce spending by cutting huge fuel subsidies. The spending had helped to keep fuel prices low.

The government has said it will launch a long-delayed Goods and Services Tax next year. And it recently announced plans to raise fees for use of roads, electricity and public transportation. Economist Yeah Kim Leng supports the moves.

"It's important that the government rationalize the subsidies because it now makes up more than half the fiscal deficit and that in itself is not sustainable".

Only about one tenth of Malaysia's working population actually pays income tax – a tax based on earnings. And payments from the state oil company, Petronas, are responsible for as much as 40 percent of the government's income.

"This so-called over reliance on the national oil company is actually not prudent."

The political opposition says it is not against cutting subsidies or other spending cuts in theory. But opposition politician Rafizi Ramli says the government should cut waste. He says the government's own reports show a huge waste of public money year after year.

"Unless there is a discipline to get rid of wastages, corruption, to re-look at the procurement practices of the country, it's like pouring money into a black hole."

Still, international studies have shown that Malaysia is comparatively less corrupt than other countries in Southeast Asia. In December, Prime Minister Najib Razak did announce some cuts in spending for Members of Parliament and civil servants.

I'm June Simms.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Birth Date

Next hear what happened in America on this date in history.

January 15 marks the birth date of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Junior. Mr. King was the son of a Baptist clergyman in Atlanta, Georgia. He also became a clergyman, and soon developed into the best-known African-American civil rights leader.

Doctor King first gained national attention in the mid-1950s in Montgomery, Alabama. He helped to organize a peaceful and effective resistance to racial separation on the city busses.

Martin Luther King is remembered as a gifted speaker. He gave his most famous speech on August 28th, 1963, at the civil-rights March on Washington in the Nation's Capital:

"I have a dream - that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

In 1964, Doctor King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. But, on April Fourth, 1968, he was shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee where he had gone to support striking city workers.

The third Monday in January is observed each year as a national holiday in the United States in honor of the civil rights leader.

Calendars Anyone?

And Finally this note.

Recently, we received our supply of VOA wall calendars for 2014. This year, the calendars not only show all 12 months of the New Year, but include beautiful pictures of the Washington, DC area. They also have pictures of all the Presidents from Harry Truman to Barack Obama. To get your calendar, simply send an e-mail to us at learningenglish@voanews.com. Make sure to include your mailing address when you write. We have several hundred 2014 calendars. But when they are gone, they are gone. So write to us today!

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