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HEADLINE: While in U.S., Cambodians Get a Lesson on Rights From Home

BYLINE: Nora Boustany

BODY:

Monovitha Kem, 24, the daughter of a prominent human rights activist in Cambodia, landed at Reagan National Airport on New Year's Eve with her younger sister, Sumathida, 18, who was beginning her first year at George Mason University. Their aunt greeted them with the news that their father, Kem Sokha, had just been arrested back in Phnom Penh.

"We did not want to believe it, because he had taken us to the airport to see us off," said Monovitha Kem, who will leave the Washington area later this month. "The arrest of my father was the tipping point," she said, referring to a wave of intimidation and threats that has driven scores of Cambodian journalists and union leaders to flee the country since October.

Under international and U.S. pressure, the government released Kem Sokha, 52, and three other activists two weeks ago. But on Monday the Cambodian prime minister, Hun Sen, reversed an earlier pledge and refused to drop charges of defamation against them, according to the Associated Press.

Hun Sen claimed the courts had ruled that it was "impossible" to withdraw the charges and that suspending them would be possible only after the high-profile case had entered the investigation stage.

"It is one-party rule using criminal defamation laws to blackmail and silence the opposition," said T. Kumar, the Washington-based advocacy director for Asia and the Pacific at Amnesty International, the human rights organization. "We have serious concerns about the independence of the judiciary in Cambodia."

Kem Sokha, a former Cambodian senator and official, heads the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, which is supported by U.S. government funds. The center has held public forums to hear complaints about conditions in Cambodia.

He and his associates were due to stand trial for allegedly criticizing a border pact between Cambodia and Vietnam. The agreement has provoked accusations that Hun Sen, who first came to power as part of a Vietnam-installed government before U.N.-organized elections in 1993, sold out because of sympathies to Vietnam and China.

Monovitha Kem, a business school graduate and aspiring lawyer, said she would lobby U.S. and international institutions to fight Hun Sen's decision. "I would like to see the charges dropped not just for my father, but for all other activists," she said in an interview Monday. "I hope they will amend the defamation law."

Monovitha Kem has met with officials at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the International Republican Institute, the U.S. Agency for International Development and major human rights groups. She also met with the assistant secretary of state for East Asia, Christopher R. Hill, who was in Cambodia in January and pressured the prime minister to release Kem Sokha and the others.

Monovitha Kem said her father had always shared his ideas and spirit of social consciousness with his two daughters. Now, she hopes to specialize in human rights and international law -- and she is already handling herself like an activist. On Jan. 13, she organized candlelight vigils in front of the White House, as well as in France and Australia.

HEADLINE: The appointment of Archbishop Pietro Sambì as Papal Nuncio

The papal nuncio-designate, Italian-born Archbishop Pietro Sambì, is still making his farewell rounds in the Holy Land before heading for Washington to replace Nuncio Gabriele Montalvo, a Colombian, who is retiring.

The appointment of Sambì, who holds doctoral degrees in theology and canon law, follows a 37-year career in the Vatican diplomatic service. After serving in Cameroon, Israel, Cuba, Nicaragua, Algeria, Belgium and India, he was named apostolic nuncio to Israel and apostolic delegate to Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories in 1998.

He has criticized the Palestinian Authority for sponsoring anti-Semitism and took Palestinian schoolbooks to the Vatican for review in 2003. He also criticized the building of the wall to separate Israel from the West Bank, saying the region required "bridges, not walls." He rose to prominence as an able negotiator when he helped end the standoff at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in 2002 after it became a flash point between Palestinian fighters and Israeli soldiers.

But weeks before his arrival here, the naming of Sambì as envoy has one American religious group upset. The leaders of **Congregation Beth Simchat Torah**, a large synagogue in New York that was founded for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Jews, say his appointment sends a message of intolerance.

Sharon Kleinbaum, the senior rabbi there, criticized Sambì for denouncing a planned gay pride festival in Jerusalem called WorldPride 2006. Last August, Sambì said the event was inappropriate for the holy city and a "provocation to the Jews, Christians and Muslims of Jerusalem and all over the world." In a recent statement, Kleinbaum, who is North American co-chair for WorldPride, said Sambì's appointment

would signal that the Catholic Church hierarchy is willing "to target the gay community for persecution and derision."

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