

Retirement Age for Low-Ranking Soldiers Slashed

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THE CAMBODIA DAILY

The bloated ranks of the Cambodian military were instantly trimmed on Wednesday when the National Assembly voted to lower the compulsory retirement age for members of the armed forces.

The move will result in almost 40,000 aging troops joining civilian life, government officials said.

In just the second meeting of parliament this year, the Assembly voted almost unanimously to change two articles in the pensions and disability law, dropping the retirement age of low-ranking soldiers from 55 to around 38 years.

Funcinpec's co-Minister of Defense Nhiek Bun Chhay said that the amendment to the law would cut around 38,000 people from the country's 110,000-strong military. It would also pave the way for injecting new blood into RCAF, he said.

"There are many old soldiers and we don't have young military officers," he told the Assembly.

"We will give the younger generation the opportunity to serve in the army," he added.

The amendment, however, allows for high-ranking officers to retire substantially later than 38 and does not include any stated retirement age for the country's famously top-heavy top brass—613 one-to-four-star generals who give Cambodia one of the largest general-to-troop ratios in the world.

"Generals that have expertise and ability, although they have reached their year of retirement, can work according to their wishes and the needs of the ministry," according to the amended article.

Those holding the rank of colonel will be forced to retire at 60, lieutenant colonels at 58 and majors at 43 to 55, but all other ranks must retire between 38 to 42, it states.

One voice of dissent on Wednesday was senior CPP lawmaker Cheam Yeap, who reminded colleagues in his own party, Funcinpec and the opposition that the nation's soldiers had paid their taxes in amputations and death.

"Those aged between 38 and 42 are still full of strength," he said, adding that forcing troops out at such a young age would leave the

country with an army of geriatric officers.

He also noted that the country's disabled soldiers have been treated badly.

"Some of their salaries are between 150 and 200 days late," he said.

Minister of Finance Keat Chhon blamed the Ministry of Social Affairs for the delayed pension payments.

Opposition leader Sam Rainsy attempted to raise the issue of non-existent "ghost soldiers" on the military payroll, but was told by CPP co-Minister of Defense Tea Banh that nothing of the sort existed.

Tea Banh also confirmed that Cambodia has 613 generals, a figure that Nhiek Bun Chhay said was "beyond the needs of RCAF and has led to national and international criticism."

The World Bank in 2004 ceased all involvement in Cambodia's efforts to demobilize its bulging military force after declaring massive misprocurement in its \$18.4 million project to ease retiring soldiers into civilian life with job training and generous assistance packages.