

## 2014 Draft Budget Reaches Assembly, Still Under Wraps

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The National Assembly's 12-member permanent committee will take its first look at the country's \$3.54 billion draft budget for 2014 on Monday, though officials are still refusing to offer a breakdown of how the money will be spent.

The draft, which allocates more than \$400 million more than this year's budget, was passed by Prime Minister Hun Sen's cabinet on October 25 and reached the Assembly on Sunday, CPP spokesman and Assembly finance committee chair Cheam Yeap said.

"The permanent committee will have a meeting [today] in order to send the draft to my side," Mr. Yeap said, referring to his committee.

The CPP-dominated Assembly is pressing ahead with the budget without input from the opposition CNRP, whose 55 elected lawmakers are refusing to take their seats in the 123-seat parliament in protest over July's still-disputed national election.

To date, only the Education Ministry has revealed its proposed share of the budget, at \$335 million.

Mr. Yeap would not reveal any additional details about the budget Monday, but highlighted the government's four priorities: human resources, vocational training, infrastructure and trade. He would not elaborate.

Despite the professed commitment to human resources and vocational training, the proposed education budget still comes in at less than 2 percent of the country's \$17.2 billion gross domestic product for 2014 as projected by the World Bank, and which is still well below what experts and even Education Ministry officials say it should be.

Mr. Yeap said much of the additional spending proposed for 2014 would go toward recovery efforts after this year's heavy flooding.

"The reason behind this increase is the flooding that damaged our people's property and killed 168 people and we lost nearly \$1 billion," he said.

Mr. Yeap refused to share a copy of the draft budget and would not say when it would be made public.

Last week, the Council of Ministers said the draft would be made public as soon as it reached the Assembly. The country has no public information law, and while the Public Finance Law makes numerous references to adhering to the principles of transparency, it does not specifically require that the budget be made public, either.

The opposition party has often accused the government of not disclosing enough information about the annual budget and curtailing debate in the Assembly. Now the CPP is threatening to pass the budget without the opposition altogether if the CNRP's lawmakers do not take their seats by the end of the year.

The CNRP says the Assembly is illegitimate without its lawmakers and cannot legally pass any laws until they join.