

World Press Freedom Day 2020: Cambodia needs journalists who can report freely

Phnom Penh, 3 May 2020

On World Press Freedom Day, journalists and press freedom advocates around the world spotlight the indispensable role of a free press in bringing crucial news and information to the public.

For the Cambodian Journalists Alliance (CamboJA) and Overseas Press Club of Cambodia (OPCC), it's an opportunity for Cambodian and international journalists to come together and highlight the importance of the few, but committed independent journalists and media organizations in Cambodia who continue to serve the public with unbiased news, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and a narrowing environment for free press.

CamboJA and the OPCC remain dedicated to upholding the ethical principles, journalistic standards and critical mission of our profession: to report news truthfully, fairly and in the public interest.

But we note that many journalists and Cambodian media organizations face serious challenges in our daily work to achieve that mission. Many journalists in Cambodia still face pressures from powerful individuals and institutions. Some of us are threatened and even face judicial persecution.

CamboJA and the OPCC are deeply concerned about ongoing restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the press, particularly over the last four months. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown just how necessary trusted news sources are but in Cambodia, during this period we continue to see the arrests of journalists and the forced closure of media outlets.

The arrest of [TVFB's reporter and editor-in-chief Sovann Rithy](#) and the revocation of the outlet's license on April 7, as well as the closure of online news outlet Chakraval Online on April 27, are recent examples.

We are also concerned about the new Law on the Management of the Nation in Emergencies, which was promulgated on Wednesday. Particularly, the section of the law which seeks to prohibit or limit "the distribution or dissemination of information that may cause fear to the public or turmoil, which undermines national security or confuses the state of emergency" raises concerns. This section of the law has the potential to be used to restrict freedom of the press and independent media.

We also raise our continuing concern regarding pending charges against two former Radio Free Asia (RFA) journalists and two former Cambodia Daily journalists, and the effects the prosecution has had on these journalists and their families.

We sincerely appreciate the government's efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, we believe it is possible and necessary to protect people from this virus without sacrificing human rights principles, including the rights to information and freedom of expression. These



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are fundamental rights of every citizen, guaranteed by international human rights law and the Cambodian Constitution.

The theme of World Press Freedom Day 2020 is “Journalism Without Fear or Favor.” Sadly, in Cambodia many journalists do fear. They fear that reporting on “sensitive” issues will land them in court or in prison. Too often this fear results in a form of self-censorship that prohibits journalists from pursuing our public-service mission and inhibits our ability to help people make informed decisions as members of society.

CamboJA and the OPCC believe the following measures will ensure a more free press in Cambodia and allow journalists to report the news in the public interest:

- Drop charges against, and release journalists who have been prosecuted in relation to their work, if sufficient evidence of having committed a crime is not forthcoming.
- Allow journalists and news organizations to operate openly and freely, without pressure or threats that inhibit our work.
- Amend the Law on the Management of the Nation in Emergencies to ensure journalists and news media are free to report the truth during states of emergency, in all cases.
- End the use of the penal code to prosecute journalists in relation to our work and instead use the Press Law, if and only if prosecution is warranted.
- Ensure press freedom by requesting retractions, corrections or clarifications in news reports believed to include factually incorrect or misleading statements, in line with Article 10 of the Press Law.
- Promote an environment that encourages journalists to abide by ethical principles, journalistic standards and our profession’s mission

As the representative bodies of about 100 Cambodian and international journalists in Cambodia, we call on the government, civil society, private sector and the public, all of whom we aim to serve with news and information they can rely on, to join us in ensuring true press freedom, not just in words but in practice.

We believe an open, transparent, professional news media environment will better serve society, as we tackle this public health crisis together and look toward a more free and healthy future for all.

The Cambodian Journalists Alliance (CamboJA) is a membership network of Cambodian journalists.

The Overseas Press Club of Cambodia (OPCC) is an organization that represents foreign correspondents and journalists working in Cambodia.

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