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*Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association*

Quarterly Monitoring Report  
**Journalism Situation  
in Cambodia**

July-September 2022 | Issue No. 05



*Phnom Penh security guards prevent a cameraman from filming a NagaWorld protest on February 24, 2022. Licadho*

This quarterly report from CamboJA is part of our ongoing efforts to monitor and advocate for press freedom in Cambodia. It includes brief summaries of incidents and news updates related to press freedom and freedom of expression of journalists from July-September 2022.

One significant development we have monitored this quarter is the detention of five journalists from local independent media outlet VOD, after reporting on a land clearance controversy at a wildlife sanctuary. Additionally, two journalists were beaten up while reporting, one by an army commander and another by timber traders.

CamboJA recorded 11 cases of harassment against 15 journalists (2 female) and observed 7 incidents related to violations of journalists' right to free expression during this quarter. Also in this report, we have compiled updates on challenges facing independent media and trends in freedom of expression and media development.

*Together for Free Press*

# Incidents reported in this quarter

## Incidents

- 1 Journalists and environmental activists detained, beaten
- 2 Preah Vihear journalist assaulted by military commander
- 3 Journalist physically attacked by illegal cross-border timber traders
- 4 Journalist summoned by Battambang provincial court after live streaming on land dispute
- 5 Media license revoked for online broadcaster over 'immoral acts'
- 6 Appeal Court upholds sentence against journalist who criticized vaccines
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- I UN says press freedom in Cambodia remains severely restricted
- II Journalists livestreaming profanity threatened with losing their license
- III Gov't says journalists should notify authorities for repeated provincial reporting
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## Safety & Security of Journalists

An environment free from physical and mental hazards is essential for press freedom. Also, people have the right to freedom of expression through media or any other means without repercussions. In the past quarter, these fundamental freedoms were again threatened by local authorities and the judiciary.

**Table 1: Types of Harassment**

Types of harassment	No. of incident reported	No. of journalists
Legal action	3	3
Administrative action	1	1
Violence/threats	4	4
Detained for questioning	1	5
Imprisonment	2	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>15</b>

## Summaries of Incidents of Harassment Against Journalists

### 1. Journalists and environmental activists detained, beaten

Five journalists from local independent media outlet VOD and four environmental activists from Khmer Thavarak were detained for about seven hours on August 16, after reporting on a land clearance controversy at a wildlife sanctuary.

The arrest was at about 11 am at Phnom Tamao Zoo, after authorities said they'd entered a prohibited area, and were taken to Bati district police station.

Mom Moniroth, a reporter from VOD who was also detained and released, said that his colleague, a video reporter, was slapped in the face.

“They didn’t even ask what we were doing, they just reacted violently,” Mr. Moniroth said. “It is a violation of reporters’ rights because they were only carrying out their work. We didn’t commit any offense, but they came to intimidate us.”



Journalists and environmental activists stand in front of Bati district police station after questioning by police, August 16, 2022. *CamboJA/ Bun Rithy*

A group of civil society organizations, including the Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA), issued a statement condemning the detentions.

“We condemn the authorities’ unconscionable abuse of power and use of physical violence against a journalist and an activist, and call for an impartial investigation into the incident, prosecution of any authorities who acted in violation of the law, and justice for the victims,” the statement said.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3Lxvb27> | <https://bit.ly/3dJOpec>

### 2. Preah Vihear journalist assaulted by military commander

Sou Senghak, 60, a journalist at Samarakot News in Preah Vihear province was allegedly beaten up by an army commander on August 20 after he witnessed what he suspected to be the illegal transportation of timber.

Sou Senghak told CamboJA that he was attending a friend’s party opposite the Battalion 394 barracks in Choam Ksan district on Sunday night when he happened to see a tractor transporting about 2 cubic meters of wood.

Senghak suspected the wood had been obtained illegally and considered stopping the truck to investigate. However, before he had the chance to do so, the Battalion’s commander exited the vehicle, approached Senghak, who was standing with his wife, and hit them both, causing Senghak’s nose to bleed.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) joined its affiliate, the Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA), in condemning the use of violence against the journalist.

“The use of violence against journalists is an infringement on press freedom. The IFJ condemns the assault against Sou Senghak and urges authorities to take immediate action to hold the commander involved responsible,” the groups said in a statement.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3PPnogL> / <https://bit.ly/3pPid5z>

### 3. A journalist was physically attacked by illegal cross-border timber traders

A local journalist in Kratie province was harshly beaten by a group of cross-border timber traders to Vietnam on 18th July 2022 at Kro Nhung Senchey commune, Snoul district, Kratie province.

The victim was identified as San Sim (call Ra), a 52-year-old reporter for Somraek Satrey Khmer in Snoul district, who told GN times that while he was sitting and eating potatoes at a villager's house, suddenly three people armed with sticks attacked him.

He identified one of the perpetrators as Khyong, an active timber merchant who transports wood into Vietnam. According to the victim, the attack was retaliation for trying to get photos of merchants and report about their illegal trade.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3IOQRp3>

### 4. A journalist was summoned by the Battambang provincial court after live streaming on land dispute

Sen Vireak, a reporter for SBN Post News in Battambang province, was summoned by the provincial court in August after local authorities accused him of incitement for live streaming from a land dispute.

Sen Vireak told CamboJA that he is very concerned about this allegation against him, noting that he went to cover information professionally and with the invitation of the community members, with no intention of inciting or leading any rebellion.

“I interviewed them, according to what they want to answer or express,” he said, adding that he hoped to provide information to the government to help the community find a solution.

Nop Vy, executive director of CamboJA, said journalists have freedom under national and international law to cover news as such land dispute and others.

“The authority should find ways of providing security and safety to journalists in order to ensure that state is respecting the international law and the constitution,” he said.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3SKLXx3>

### 5. Media license revoked for online broadcaster over ‘immoral acts’

The Minister of Information has decided to revoke the broadcasting license from San Bunthoeun, a member of Prime Minister Hun Sen's bodyguard unit, over “immoral acts” during his live-streaming on Facebook.

In a proclamation issued on 22 August, Information Minister Khieu Kanharith, said San Bunthoeun was found to have committed acts that insulting the public, affected social morality and the honor and dignity of professional journalists – which he said violated the contract the applicant had filed with the ministry.

The decision to revoke San Bunthoeun's broadcasting license came just one day after Hun Sen reacted to a video livestream of him drinking, smashing dishes and cursing on his social media page. The prime minister said that “the bad character of San Bunthoeun cannot be changed” and ordered his expulsion from the bodyguard unit and army.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3yguWni>

### 6. Appeal court upholds sentence against journalist who criticized vaccines

The Battambang Appeal Court in July upheld the provincial court's guilty verdict against Kao Piseth, a journalist who criticized the government's use of Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccines.

The provincial court's verdict issued 18 January 2022 sentenced Piseth to two years in prison and a 3 million Riels fine for “inciting to commit a felony and obstruction of the implementation of measures to prevent COVID-19.”

Kao Piseth was arrested on 14 July 2021 and accused of “inciting to commit a felony” after publicly posting on Facebook criticizing the government over the use of Chinese-made vaccines to inoculate the population against COVID-19.

Piseth is not the only person who's been charged under a law aimed at preventing the spread of misinformation during the pandemic. Prime Minister Hun Sen announced he had directed authorities to detain a Tik Tok user who'd posted misinformation about COVID-19.

“If you don't want to be jailed, don't do this because this was not funny, it was frightening the public and this is not freedom of speech,” the prime minister said at National Fisheries Day activities in Banteay Meanchey province.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3Rfvd0U>

## 7. Final decision issued to drop charges against Cambodia Daily journalists

The Appeal Court in Tbong Khmum in July issued a written final decision dropping charges against former Cambodia Daily journalists Aun Pheap and Zsombor Peter, finally bringing an end to their prosecution with no further scope for appeals, their defense lawyer said.

Aun Pheap and Peter were charged with incitement in 2017 after reporting on that year’s commune election in Ratanakiri. Three years later, the Ratanakiri Provincial Court dropped the charges when the plaintiff withdrew his complaint. But the prosecution appealed, leading the Appeal Court in January to uphold the lower court’s decision to drop the charges pending further appeals.

Both Pheap and Peter have left Cambodia amid the court action against them. The two journalists were known for their coverage of illegal logging in the country and bringing to light the involvement of the military in the illicit trade, for which they won a regional award for an article published in 2017.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3OjbpYo>



Former Cambodia Daily reporters Zsombor Peter and Aun Pheap. (Ben Woods)

## Reporting in a Hostile Environment – Updates on Cambodia’s Media Situation

Among the many challenges facing Cambodian journalists, the fear of legal trouble continues to be a daily part of the job. Journalists often feel intimidated or threatened by government actions, whether it be police stopping journalists from filming or taking legal actions against them for simply doing their job. From July to September 2022, CamboJA recorded 11 cases of harassment against 15 journalists (2 female). Five of those journalists were detained for questioning, four experienced harassment and threat, three faced legal actions, and one was revoked license.

### RECORDED CASES OF HARASSMENT (JUL-SEP 2022)



## I. UN says press freedom in Cambodia remains severely restricted

Journalists in Cambodia are increasingly being subjected to various forms of harassment and pressure, as well as violence, amid growing curtailments on civic space in the country, according to a report released by the UN's Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights issued on August 3rd.

"The findings in this report are very concerning, and I urge the authorities to take on board our recommendations to ensure the media can carry out their vital work fairly and transparently for the benefit of all Cambodians," the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, said in a statement.

More than 80 percent of journalists surveyed said they had experienced surveillance and disproportionate or unnecessary restrictions, including in relation to access to information.

Information Ministry spokesman Meas Sophorn rejected the OHCHR findings, saying they came only from interviews with anti-government journalists and didn't reflect the overall reality of the media in the country.

"I think that this report is not strange and nothing new that we have to be concerned about because the group of people who have written the report have only collected one side of the information," he said.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3JHKX9v>



Phnom Penh security guards prevent a cameraman from filming a NagaWorld protest on February 24, 2022. Licadho

## II. Journalists livestreaming profanity threatened with losing their license

Prime Minister Hun Sen in August instructed the Ministry of Information to revoke license of any journalist who uses derogatory language on air, including livestreaming on social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube.

Mr. Hun Sen's instruction came after two of his bodyguards, who happened to be news publishers, were removed from the Defense Ministry roster for inappropriate behavior of smashing dishes and using derogatory language while live on Facebook.

The ministry of information days later reaffirmed it would take action to cancel journalists' licenses immediately if found using foul language in the guise of professionalism.

Nop Vy, an executive director of CamboJA, said authorities should educate journalists who use foul language first, adding that termination of licenses is a threat to freedom of press.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3dSNm61> / <https://bit.ly/3UuNwkz>

## III. Gov't says journalists should notify authorities for repeated provincial reporting

Government spokesman Phay Siphon said on Sept. 1 that journalists should report to the provincial information department when frequently reporting in a jurisdiction, a suggestion rejected by an independent-media advocate.

"If the journalists have frequent missions in a province, they should submit a letter to the provincial information department" to state their intentions, Siphon said at a press conference reviewing five years of achievements by the Information Ministry.

He said officials can feel intimidated by frequent visits, and said notification letters can be valid for a year, he said.

Cambodian Journalists Alliance executive director Nop Vy, however, said there should be no such requirement to inform authorities about reporting visits.

"Citizens don't have to inform their presence to authorities or anyone when they travel, and we journalists [should not] have to inform them before travel [either]," Vy said.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3e1H43Q>

## IV. Press freedom groups, donors tout benefits of a national press council

Press freedom groups on 16 September 2022 discussed the potential benefits and goals of establishing a national press council, including developing a standardized code of ethics for journalists nationwide and promoting public trust and self-regulation in the industry.

Last year, the number of journalists arrested and harassed while working increased by nearly 50% compared to 2020, according to the Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA). Nearly 100 journalists faced harassment in 49 cases, including physical attacks, threats of violence, arrest, imprisonment and legal actions last year. Thirty-seven journalists were imprisoned on charges of incitement, extortion and other crimes.

Ith Sothoeuth, acting executive director at the Cambodian Center for Independent Media, said a press council would increase the sector’s capacity for self-regulation in a media environment in which problems are regularly addressed by the government in court or through the Information Ministry. “In Cambodia, media and journalists have been harassed by the government and court system, so this is a critical time that we need to have a press council,” Sothoeuth said.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3E7DHTT>

## V. Cambodia commemorates International Day of Universal Access to Information with emphasis to pass the A2I Law

On 28 September, Access to Information coalition — comprised of 30 CSO and NGOs — commemorated the International Day of Universal Access to Information with a National Conference on Universal Access to Information that gathered over 150 representatives from the Government, civil society, indigenous communities, youth groups, organizations of persons with disabilities, and political parties, including CPP, Candlelight and FUNCINPEC.

Participants in the event discussed the importance of Access to Information in the digital age and advocated for the passing of the Access to Information Law in Cambodia was reflected.

Sardar Umar Alam, UNESCO’s representative to Cambodia, said that “today’s societies need inclusive access to information to build just, peaceful, and sustainable futures. UNESCO therefore calls on countries around the world to embrace information as a global public good.”

“In Cambodia, UNESCO will continue to work with the authorities, media stakeholders, and civil-society organizations to support and advocate for strengthening the access to information ecosystem in Cambodia through developing policies and legislation that contribute to freedom of expression for all,” he added.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3y8V8PY>



Civil society groups and a UN staffer speak on a panel discussing the establishment of a press council in Cambodia, in Phnom Penh on September 16, 2022. CamboJA/Pring Samrang



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