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Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association

Journalism Situation in Cambodia

Quarterly Monitoring Report

January-March 2023 | Issue No. 07



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 January - March 2023.

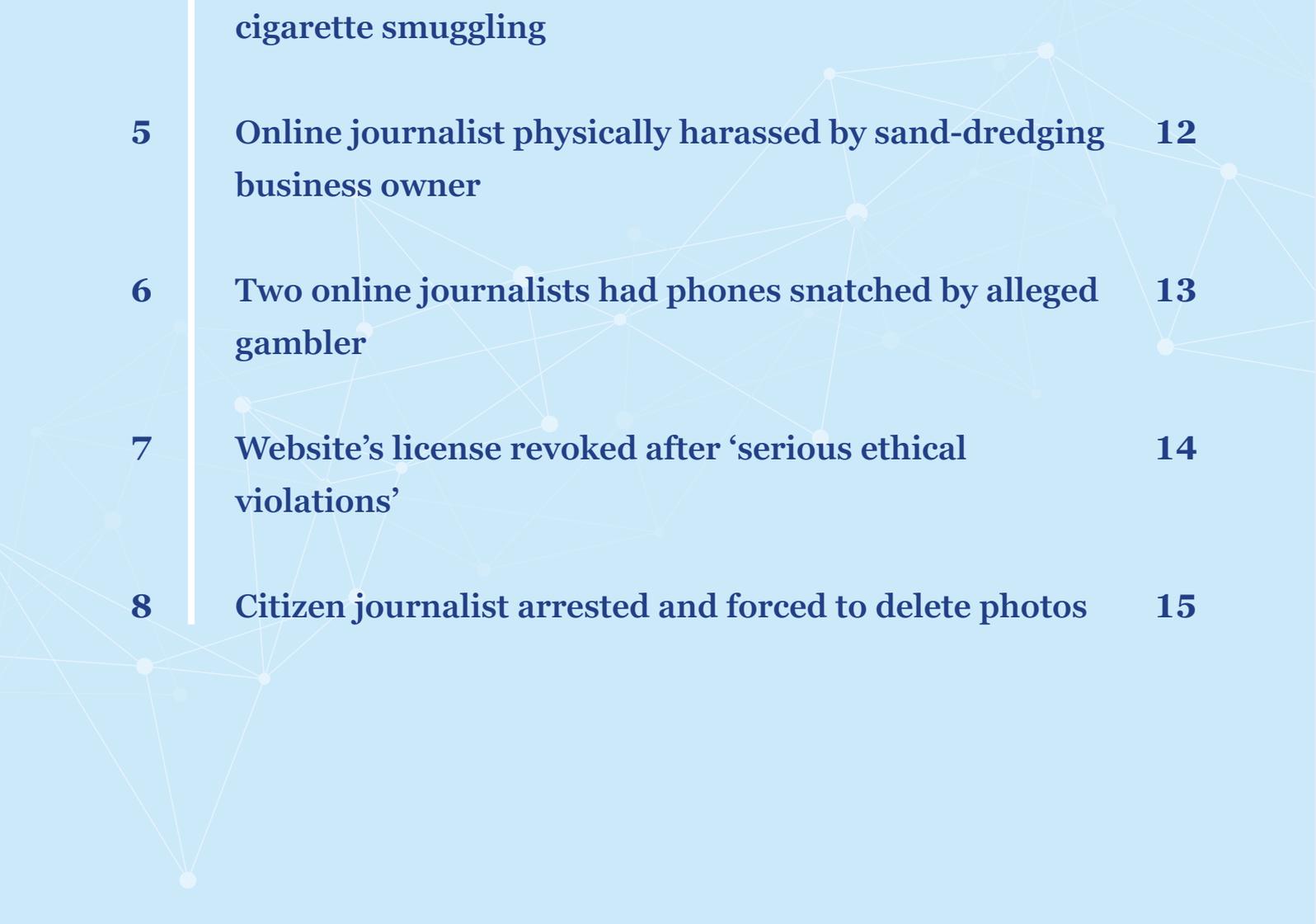
One major development this quarter is the Prime Minister Hun Sen's decision to shut down Voice of Democracy (VOD), which is among the country's only local independent media outlets. Besides VOD, at least 4 other digital news outlets had their licenses revoked by the Information Ministry during this quarter.

Looking at journalists' safety from three dimensions — physical, digital, and legal safety — CamboJA recorded at least 8 incidents of harassment against journalists, including one sexual harassment case against female VOD reporter and hostility against VOD journalists after their newsroom was shut down. Also in this report, we have compiled some key updates concerning the media environment this quarter.

Together for Free Press

Incidents reported in this quarter

Incidents



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Summaries of Incidents of Harassment Against Journalists

Safety Dimension	Type of Harassment	Number of Affected Media / Journalists
Physical Safety	Attack on equipment and personal belongings;	Five journalists including a citizen journalist
Digital Safety	Physical assault; Verbal intimidation	one female reporter and one male reporter of VOD
Legal Safety	Online sexual harassment;	5 media licenses revoked
Online bullying	Online bullying	

1. Information Ministry revoked three media licenses following reports on senior official’s role in land fraud

The Information Ministry revoked the licenses of three media outlets in March after they published reports exposing a senior government official’s role in land fraud.

The Ministry stated that online Khmer language media outlets Federation of Cambodia-ASEAN Journalists, Raksmeay Kampong Cham and Dumnong Knong Srok had “committed serious violations of journalistic ethics” and “not followed the instruction of the ministry.”

Chea Lyheang, president and publisher of the Federation of Cambodia-ASEAN Journalists, expressed disappointment that the Ministry revoked his outlet’s license without clear explanation.

“We regret this, please show the exact issue and what mistake we have made,” Lyheang told CamboJA. Lyheang said the Information Ministry had called him for a meeting in February and requested that he remove articles alleging that government officials had forged documents in a land dispute and, in another case, involved in the extortion of poor families.

One report, published in all three outlets, alleged that senior ruling CPP National Assembly member Sar Chamrong, former deputy governor of Banteay Meanchey, forged documents to gain more than 60 hectares of land in Banteay Meanchey.

Lyheang said Sar Chamrong complained to the Information Ministry about the report.

Chamrong heads the National Assembly’s Commission on Human Rights, Complaints and Investigations. In February 2020, Minister of Information Khieu Kanharith led a delegation to pay respects at the funeral of Chamrong’s mother.

Chamrong could not be reached for comment by CamboJA.

The Information Ministry claimed the articles damaged the honor of the officials named in the report, according to Lyheang.

“I replied that I cannot remove the information because it is real information, especially a lie to Prime Minister Hun Sen,” Lyheang said.

Another article published in the three outlets reported that a Takeo provincial deputy prosecutor had seized property from three families who bought it from Ratanakiri province and demanded they pay him money to get it back.

Chea Saren, publisher of Dumnong Knong Srok, published the same reports, including in a video segment receiving more than 169,000 views on Facebook. He said the Information Ministry requested he remove the articles, which he refused to do.

“We have published the real information of villagers, which might have impacted other people’s interests,” he said.

Information Ministry spokesperson Meas Sophorn denied it asked the media outlets to remove articles. He said the outlets had broadcast “disinformation” and accused them of acting at the behest of outside parties for personal gain.

Following the loss of its license, outlet Dumnong Knong Srok posted a goodbye to followers on its Facebook page.

“Farewell to the professional journalists all over the Kingdom of Cambodia who are in love with the field of journalism,” Dumnong Knong Srok said in a Friday post. “Wish them good health and continue to spread true information to the society for the motherland.”

Source: <https://bit.ly/4onhlpl>



**Types of harassment:
Closure or suspension
of media outlet by
authority**

2. Prime Minister Hun Sen shuts down independent media outlet VOD

Prime Minister Hun Sen announced the government was revoking the license for media outlet VOD in a Facebook post in February, after he previously demanded an apology for an article he claimed was inaccurate.

“I decided to finish this issue and allow the Ministry of Information to revoke VOD’s license now and finish all broadcasting by 10 a.m. on February 13, 2023,” he wrote in Khmer. “We shut down all forms of broadcasting...”

Hun Sen had on Saturday ordered VOD Khmer to apologize for and retract a Khmer language article published on February 9. The article had reported that the Prime Minister’s son, Lieutenant General Hun Manet, had signed off on an order for \$100,000 in aid to earthquake-stricken Turkey in his father’s absence.

Government spokesperson Phay Siphon was quoted in the article saying in Khmer “it is not wrong for Hun Manet to play his father’s role in providing aid to Turkey.”

But Hun Manet, set to assume leadership of the ruling Cambodian People’s Party once his father retires, denied in a subsequent social media post that he had signed off on the document. Hun Manet demanded an immediate correction and for VOD to provide evidence of his signature on the document authorizing aid.

On February 11, Hun Sen posted on his Facebook page demanding VOD issue a public apology to the government and his son within 72 hours or face the loss of their media license. He shortened the deadline in a subsequent post to 10 a.m. February 13.

While staff from Cambodian Center for Independent Media — the NGO which created and runs VOD — met with the Ministry of Information Sunday morning, the situation was not resolved.

VOD Khmer published a follow-up article to note Hun Manet denied signing the document and CCIM sent a letter to Hun Sen earlier on Sunday stating it had “regret” for “confusion” caused by the article.

By around 7 p.m. on Sunday, Hun Sen issued his Facebook post ordering the Ministry of Information to revoke VOD’s license. He said he had been unsatisfied with VOD’s response to his ultimatum, noting the outlet had declined to apologize and use the words he wanted. Minister of Information Khieu Kanharith posted on his Facebook page that other media sites should take notice.

“It is a lesson learned for other media institutions,” he said. “The media institutions that do not agree to publish clarifications, [they] will face the revocation of their licenses.”

Commentators lamenting the potential loss of VOD across social media noted the timing of the shut down, in the run up to the July elections and shortly after top leaders from the opposition Candlelight Party faced lawsuits, arrest and intimidation.

VOD senior reporter Morm Moniroth said he was very disappointed and hoped a solution might still be reached.

“Normally, the role of reporters when they hear anything news, they report to the public,” he said. “We don’t have any bad intentions towards anyone. It is just to provide information to the public.”

Source: <https://cambojanews.com/prime-minister-shuts-down-independent-media-vod/>



**Types of harassment:
Closure or suspension
of media outlet by
authority**

3. After VOD shutdown, hostility against reporters

Following the government-ordered shutdown of VOD, the outlet was the subject of vulgar social media memes and its reporters faced personal attacks online and in government-aligned media.

The female VOD Khmer reporter who authored the article drawing the ire of Hun Manet and Hun Sen also began to face misogynistic vitriol and sexual harassment on social media.

Pheng Vannak, a prominent Facebook personality and former military official, wrote in Khmer on his Facebook page, “As a young girl, but with a wild character...with such a cheap character, whoever marries you would be finished...”

A group of more than 40 civil society organizations released a joint-statement condemning the sexual harassment of a female VOD reporter on social media.

The letter was addressed to the Minister of Information, Minister of Women’s Affairs, Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, and the Minister of Post and Telecommunications, urging the ministries to take action against Pheng Vannak.

Hun Sen rebuked the organizations over the letter. “These NGOs were established only to oppose the government and not to do anything to protect women’s equality,” Hun Sen said during a February 20 speech to Phnom Penh university students.

“If it is necessary to audit [the NGOs] to find out where the money came from, we have the right to do so and the Ministry of Interior or the Anti-Corruption Unit could investigate,” he added.

The Ministry of Women’s Affairs responded with a statement urging civil society organizations to remain neutral and not pursue political interests.

“We call on civil society organizations to adhere to professional ethics and display impartiality in the conduct of their work, avoiding the application of biased and double standards,” the statement read. Chim Channeang, secretary general of the Cambodian NGO Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, signed the statement. She said the aims of the organizations signing the statement were not political.

And she said that condemning the harassment of the female VOD journalist was only intended to promote greater protection of women.

“We are not taking sides, but the fact is that the girl who reported the news was insulted, and it is such a serious threat to make,” Channeang said. “It destroys her reputation, especially it affects her mental health.”

Other VOD staff also came under attack on social media and in government-aligned news outlets. The day VOD’s license was revoked on February 13, a series of Twitter users — many appearing to be fake accounts — began posting identical cartoons and messages applauding VOD’s closure with the hashtag #VODshithead.

The Twitter accounts shared cartoons which portrayed VOD as a tool of foreign agents such as “foreign embassies” and “NGO[s]”.

In one cartoon branded with the vulgar hashtag, a figure resembling the American icon Uncle Sam, in a tophat with the VOD logo, has a thought bubble attached reading “You must adhere to the strategies I have established” while painting Cambodia with paint labeled “human right” and “democracy.”

A group of white journalists stands watching and one says “Each of us must follow our boss’s instructions regarding fake reports. Our boss gives us money and protects us.”

The attacks on VOD reporters extended to government-aligned media.

Following a BBC profile of prominent VOD reporter Mech Dara titled “Cambodia: ‘Every newsroom I worked in gets silenced’”, Dara’s former employer The Phnom Penh Post sought to undermine Dara’s credibility by negatively portraying his mental health.

In a February 17 editorial titled “The Post: “Shut down” and “silenced”?” The Post disputed the characterization that Dara had left because the paper had changed ownership to a PR firm with close ties to the government in 2018.

But they also included a section titled “about Dara’s personality” where the unsigned editorial described Dara as a “coward”, “mentally impacted” with “prominent personality flaws.” Dara declined to comment.

J. Daniel Sims, Cambodia director for anti-trafficking NGO International Justice Mission, noted in a Twitter thread that Dara had been one of the VOD reporters leading the publication’s sustained exposé into Cambodia’s human trafficking and scam industry.

“This is the most pernicious and dangerous form of propaganda as it effectively reduces the net political cost of any potential violence against him [Dara],” Sims said of the Post’s attacks on Dara. “In a context like this one, the risks of such a horrifying outcome are anything but theoretical.”

Source: <https://cambojanews.com/after-vod-shutdown-hostility-against-reporters/>



**Type of Harassment:
Online Sexual
harassment & Online
Bullying**

4. Online journalist arrested after taking pictures of cigarette smuggling

On 28th January 2023, Sorn Sorida, a journalist from online media outlet Sangkom Pachabon, was arrested by a group of ten police after he reported about cigarette smuggling in Kandal province.

According to the 30-year-old reporter, he accidentally saw a man smuggling cigarettes across Cambodia’s border Vietnam through K’am Samnor border checkpoint while he was visiting his relative there.

He told CamboJA via a phone interview that he had captured photos of the smuggling activity and went to K'am Samnor immigration police station to report the case, but the police referred him to report it to their boss instead. Sorida said he did not follow their instruction and left the police station.

On the way back from the police station, he said over 10 policemen on motorbikes followed him and ordered him to stop. Sorida was brought to the police station and accused of 'reporting without a mission letter and failure to inform police before carrying out his journalistic work.'

Sorida told CamboJA he was forced to accept in writing that he was wrong and delete the pictures he had taken in exchange for being released.

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



5. Online journalist physically harassed by sand-dredging business owner

Sin Samnang, editor-in-chief of BTN media, said he had his press card snatched by sand dredging business owner Lay Ra while he was covering impacts of sand dredging on a rice field on 26 January in Kandal province's Kandal Steung district.

According to Samnang, he was also violently pushed into a canal, causing damage to his mobile phone.

Samnang told CamboJA the case was resolved after he agreed to accept compensation from Lay Ra at the police station.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3Rgyj5r>



**Type of Harassment:
Attack on equipment
and personal
belonging/Physical
Assault**

6. Two online journalists had their phones snatched by an alleged gambler

Un Chantha, an online reporter and publisher of Raksmeay Krong Takhmao media, said he got his mobile phone smashed by an unidentified alleged gambler on 23 January while he was filming a cock fighting ring in Phnom Penh. Sun Kvanha, another journalist from Penh Chet Media who was also on-site, told CamboJA the gambler also tried to snatch his phone but was unsuccessful.

The journalists filed complaint at the Prek Pra commune police station after the incident occurred.

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



**Type of Harassment:
Attack on equipment
and personal
belonging/other
properties of media**

7. Website's license revoked after 'serious ethical violations'

The Ministry of Information revoked the license of news website Khmer Cover TV (KCTV) on 16th January 2023 after finding that the news institution has committed 'serious ethical violations'.

According to the Information Ministry's statement signed by the Minister, KCTV has committed serious ethical violations of the journalism profession and has twice refused to follow the Ministry's guardianship instruction, which is contrary to the business contract of the applicant's deposited with the Ministry of Information. However, the statement did not mention any specific case of ethical violation.

The digital news outlet was among the three media outlets which had their licenses cancelled once on 15 March 2022 by the Information Ministry for "publishing information that violated journalistic professional ethics and corporate contracts." The Ministry revised its decision on 18 July 2022 allowing the three media outlets to resume its operation.

On 23 December 2022, KCTV media published an article and video clip reportedly showing Leng Navatra Group workers pumping sand to fill in a lake to install a concrete road to access the tycoon's development project in L'vea Em district, Kandal province. The destruction of wetlands surrounding Phnom Penh has long been criticized for worsening flooding in the capital.

Navatra's company Galaxy Navatra sent a letter demanding KCTV take down the video clip and article and claiming the media outlet had committed defamation.

KCTV refused to remove the report from its Facebook page. Its publisher Min Khoeun told CamboJA that the article and video were factual and KCTV had the right to publish the information. He said he had not extorted or defamed Navatra.

Source: <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501223002/websites-license-revoked-after-serious-ethical-violations/>

Source: <https://cambojanews.com/journalists-facing-extortion-charges-tycoon-threats-for-sensitive-stories/>



**Type of Harassment:
Verbal intimidation**

8. A citizen journalist was arrested and forced to delete photos

Citizen journalist Snguon Nhien, who is also a land rights activist of Lor Peang community, was arrested when he was taking photos of around 50 Lor Peang community members gathering in front of Kampong Chhnang provincial court on 18 January 2023.

According to Snguon Nhien, he was pushed into a police car by four provincial policemen following an order from a prosecutor accusing him of taking photos without permission and sent to the provincial police headquarter where he was ordered to delete all the photos. He said the police confiscated three phones—one from him and two others from the protestors.

He was released about two hours later after the photos were deleted from his phone.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3H4cwZT>



**Type of Harassment:
Verbal intimidation &
Attack on equipment and
personal belonging/
media equipment**

Key Updates on Cambodia's Media Situation

I. Shutdown of VOD undermines press freedom, embassies and civil society groups warn

After the government shuttered independent media Voice of Democracy (VOD) on Monday, dozens of civil society groups decried the decision and numerous embassies warned the loss of the publication seriously damaged Cambodia's dwindling press freedom in the run-up to the July national election.

VOD staff and supporters gathered tearfully at the organization's office in Phnom Penh, while district authorities and Information Ministry officials delivered a letter formally revoking the publication's media license on Monday morning.

"We will be silent, we will not continue our broadcasting," said Ith Sothoeouth, media director for the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM), VOD's parent organization, though he added the organization was still searching for a solution.

More than 90 civil society organizations, including CamboJA News' parent organization Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association, signed a statement Monday stating they were "deeply disturbed" by the decision to shut down VOD. The statement also condemned social media misogyny directed towards a female VOD journalist involved in the report which drew the Prime Minister's ire.

Access to VOD's website and servers have also been blocked by some mobile and internet service providers, the statement also noted.

The European Union Delegation to Cambodia — along with the Australian, American, British, French, German and Swedish embassies — issued statements Monday expressing concern about the closure of VOD.

"We are deeply troubled by the abrupt decision to revoke Voice of Democracy's (VOD) media license," the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh stated Monday. "We urge Cambodian authorities to revisit this decision."

"This decision seriously undermines media freedom and pluralism, which are essential for any open and free society," The European Union in Cambodia stated. "Access of information and freedom of speech are basic tenets of a democratic society and the foundation for free and fair elections. These rights are enshrined in Cambodia's Constitution and should be fully protected."

"This flimsy and absurd decision barely masks the government's real intent to further suppress media freedom," said Human Rights Watch Deputy Asia Director Phil Robertson in a statement.

“The international community needs to wake from its slumber over Cambodia,” Robertson added. “There needs to be an urgent campaign of public pressure on PM Hun Sen and his government to respect rights, or risk be[ing] termed as a failed democracy — and treated that way in terms of aid and trade.”

Agriculture Minister Dith Tina, who last year had threatened to sue the paper for reporting farmers’ complaints, implied VOD had gotten what it deserved.

“Once upon of time, we did tell them what was right and what was wrong,” he wrote on Twitter. “Has they learned ? Hopefully, this time.”

“As long as the RGC [Royal Government of Cambodia] perceives the expression of criticism as a crime, freedom of expression will continue to exist only as a mere aspiration in Cambodia,” said Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights.

CCIM’s Sothoeth said the organization is still trying to figure out how to support its more than 40 staff and will strive to carry on in some capacity.

“We will try our best to work with relevant stakeholders to operate VOD and continue providing credible news to Cambodian people,” he said. “If VOD cannot continue forward, we consider this is a backward step for the media sector in Cambodia.”

Source: <https://cambojanews.com/shutdown-of-vod-undermines-press-freedom-embassies-and-civil-society-groups-warn/>

II. All Oddar Meanchey journalists ordered to check in at provincial hall

The Oddar Meanchey Information Department ordered a roll call of all local journalists at its office, saying if any journalist or organization failed to appear, the department would not recognize their work.

Officials described the process as routine, but some raised concerns of rising restrictions against reporters.

The department issued a statement last month giving all publishers and reporters at websites, magazines, television and newswires from January 2-31 to appear at the provincial information department office.

All journalists must bring valid media licenses, Information Ministry press cards and letters of introduction from their outlets, it said.

The statement said the purpose was to make it easy to compile basic statistics about news outlets in the province and report to the governor.

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

III. PM says draft law on access to information to be ready by 2025

Prime Minister Hun Sen said that the draft law on access to information will be ready between 2024 and 2025, during the 7th mandate of the Government.

Addressing the fifth get-together with the media on Saturday, Hun Sen said the process has been delayed because the government wants to listen to all relevant authorities for more input into the law.

The premier added, “We need to collect all inputs and concerns from all parties for this draft law, but some NGOs want the government to spend more time in the preparation of the draft law,” he added. However, some of the NGOs urged the government to expedite the process.

Information Minister Khieu Kanharith said, “The draft law is being scrutinised by the Ministry of Justice after the Ministry of Information has finished its evaluation in coordination with another ministry concerned.”

He added that his ministry in collaboration with UNESCO and other relevant ministries, institutions and partners will work in the drafting of the law in a participatory and consultative manner.

This law sets out the rights and obligations of receiving and providing information, as well as the principles, rules, procedures to access confidential information and protection of whistle-blowers in order to ensure that every member of the public has the right to receive information from public institutions in accordance with Cambodia’s Constitution.

Executive Director of the Cambodian Journalists Alliance, Nop Vy, said that this draft law on access to information is long overdue.

Vy said, “This law helps the media to function effectively, especially in getting information from the spokespersons,” adding that as of now the journalists are struggling to get relevant information from the spokespersons.

He added that the spokespersons of ministries should be friendly and open-minded with the reporters.

Source: <https://bit.ly/42qyEaB>



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