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Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association

Journalism Situation in Cambodia

Quarterly Monitoring Report

April - June 2023 | Issue No. 08



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 April-June 2023.

Among the cases noted this quarter is the verbal intimidation of a CamboJA reporter by the Interior Ministry spokesperson.

Looking at journalists' safety from three dimensions — physical, digital, and legal safety — CamboJA recorded 7 incidents of harassment against at least 9 journalists, including an online reporter who was arrested and placed in pretrial detention.

Also in this report, we have compiled some key updates concerning the media environment this quarter.

Together for Free Press

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Summaries of Incidents of Harassment Against Journalists Recorded from 1st April until 30th June 2023

Safety Dimension	Type of Harassment	Number of Affected Media / Journalists
Physical Safety	Attack on equipment and personal belongings; Physical assault; Verbal intimidation	Six journalists harassed and threatened; one online reporter detained
Digital Safety	Online sexual harassment; Online bullying	One former VOD reporter and one male foreign journalist and one RFA Khmer reporter
Legal Safety	Closure or suspension of media outlet by authority	

1. Cambodia Daily correspondent received death threat after criticizing Prime Minister Hun Sen

On June 19th, Taing Sarada, chief correspondent and anchor for The Cambodia Daily, claimed he received a death threat from Pheng Vannak, a pro-government social media personality, after Sarada criticized Prime Minister Hun Sen and his family on the Idea Talk news program.

Sarada shared voice messages apparently from Vannak saying he **“would chop Sarada’s head with an ax if Sarada entered Cambodia.”** Sarada, who lives abroad, also accused Vannak of threatening his family, including his parents who still live in Cambodia, and suggesting CPP agents in the US could hurt him.

“After I received these threats, last Wednesday at around 1 pm, a stranger knocked loudly on our door, but we dare not open it,” Sarada said “My parents in law and my eight-years old son were so scared. At 4 pm, the same day, I saw a strange black car, which looked like a surveillance car, stop and park in front of my house while the passengers remained inside the vehicle for several hours.”

On June 22, in another Facebook livestream, Pheng Vannak said he would not hesitate to destroy anyone who destroyed peace and stability in Cambodia.

Source:

https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=221781040730189&extid=NS-UNK-UNK-UNK-IOS_GKoT-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&ref=sharing

<https://cambojanews.com/licensed-media-publisher-threatens-to-kill-cambodia-daily-khmer-journalist-on-facebook/>



**Type of harassment:
online intimidation**


2. CamboJA photographer harassed by authorities while covering protest at new airport

On June 8, CamboJA photo editor Pring Samrang was questioned and had his press pass photographed by local authorities while covering a story about villagers protesting the filling in of land near their homes at the \$1.5 billion airport development project in Kandal province.

About 30 villagers from Kandal Stung district's Kandork commune, located about 5 kilometers from the airport development site, protested against the filling in of land near their homes. Dozens of local authorities and police were deployed at the protest site.

Samrang said that while he was taking pictures of the protesters, a man in civilian clothes approached him and took a picture of him and his press card. The man left, but later returned and asked Samrang to accompany him to meet his superior. Samrang refused and left the site immediately after being advised by villagers to leave in order to avoid being arrested.

Source: in-house interview by CamboJA



**Type of harassment:
physical intimidation**


3. Prime Minister Hun Sen lashed out at Radio Free Asia reporter

On June 4, Prime Minister Hun Sen criticized Radio Free Asia’s (RFA) Khmer service, calling one of its reporters a “silly person.” Hun Sen warned that if RFA Khmer wanted its office to be reopened in Phnom Penh, it would need to remove the reporter he called “silly.”

Although the prime minister did not name the reporter specifically, he was likely referring to Chun Chanboth, the manager of RFA Khmer.

In 2017, RFA Khmer closed its Phnom Penh office after two of its staffers were arrested on spying charges. At the time, RFA said it was “impossible” to continue operating in Cambodia.

Source: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=6315648271889979&extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-IO5_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&ref=sharing



**Type of Harassment:
Online bullying**

4. Interior Ministry spokesperson warned CamboJA reporter over report on opposition Candlelight Party

CamboJA reporter Khuon Narim received a verbal threat from Ministry of Interior spokesperson Khieu Sopheak during a phone interview on May 29. Sopheak warned the journalist that he could go to jail for asking questions about the opposition Candlelight Party.

“Such nonsense talk [questions], does a journalist want to go to jail?” Sopheak said.

This is not the first time that a CamboJA reporter has received a warning or threat from an Interior Ministry official. In May alone, Narim received three warnings from Sopheak while reporting on the opposition Candlelight Party.

On May 12, Narim called Sopheak to ask why the Ministry of Interior had not provided a copy of the Candlelight Party’s original registration letter, but instead had only issued a clarification letter.

“Are you with the Candlelight Party?” Sopheak replied. “Is CamboJA taking sides with Candlelight? You must ask in the name of a journalist, not as a spokesperson for Candlelight.”

“Please be a professional journalist, and don’t be a mercenary journalist working for foreigners. Who is giving CamboJA money?” he continued.

On May 9, after a meeting between the Ministry of Interior and the leadership of the Candlelight Party, Narim called Sopheak to ask about the results of the meeting.

However, Sopheak instead questioned Narim about where CamboJA had been getting its funding. “Where do you get your salary from? You must know the funding source. I would ask who supports CamboJA? Where does CamboJA get funding to do that work?” Sopheak said.

“I will not give you the information, you yourself don’t know who you are. I don’t know where CamboJA is from, so how can I give you the information? As a journalist, you must show your identity,” he added.

Source: in-house interview by CamboJA



5. Online Journalist in Kampong Thom province detained on extortion charge

Seoun Sochea, an online reporter for TNM, was arrested on May 10 by the Kampong Thom military police and taken into custody on charges of extortion.

Sem Bora, the publisher of TNM, told CamboJA that Sochea had only started working for the outlet in 2021 while the charge dated back to 2020. Bora said that the charges against Sochea stemmed from a series of reports he had written about illegal logging in Kampong Thom province.

Bora acknowledged that Sochea had received \$10 from Heng Ny, a timber dealer, but said that this should not be considered extortion. “Heng Ny gave Sochea some money, but Sochea did not extort her,” Bora said. “As far as I know, he received just about \$10 each time.”

Bora added that Kampong Thom authorities had warned Sochea and his media outlet on several occasions not to report on illegal logging and environmental issues.

On May 12, 2023, TNM’s publisher wrote a letter to the Minister of Information, seeking intervention. The letter stated that three timber dealers and an environmental official had sued Sochea for publishing false information, incitement, and extortion committed in 2020, even though Sochea had not yet started working as a reporter for TNM at that time.

“This is an act that intimidates journalists who dare to report the truth in Kampong Thom province, because it threatens the interests of the environmental officials and timber dealers who benefit from illegal logging,” the letter said.

Sochea was released on bail on June 1, after he apologized and acknowledged that his report had not been properly verified. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oryr9TZldGE>

Source: CamboJA interviewed TNM’s publisher and Sochea’s lawyer



**Type of Harassment:
physical intimidation**

6. Former VOD journalist harassed by Information Minister over SEA Games report

Cambodian Minister of Information Khieu Kanharith hit back at a report by Nikkei Asia on the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games), claiming that it was not factual.

The report, titled “SEA Games in Cambodia: Workers and athletes call buildup ‘a mess’,” was published on May 4. It described the challenges facing Cambodia in hosting the SEA Games, including traffic jams, poor living conditions for workers, and a lack of preparation for some events.

In a Facebook post on May 6, 2023, Kanharith called the report “discredited” and accused its author, Cambodian freelance journalist Mech Dara, of being a “cheap journalist” who serves the interests of foreigners.

“We recognize that Cambodia is not yet a paradise,” Kanharith wrote. “But Cambodia’s efforts to host the SEA Games have only been met with three photos and a discredited article written by Mech Dara and his foreign faction published in international media.”

The SEA Games is a major sporting event held every two years in Southeast Asia. The 2023 SEA Games were hosted by Cambodia from May 5 to 16.

Source: [Screenshot minister’s Facebook](#)

<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501285975/government-slams-nikkei-asia-report-on-seag-as-factless/>



**Type of Harassment:
Online bullying**

7. Three journalists forced to leave forest community while reporting on deforestation

On April 21, foreign reporter Gerry Flynn from Mongabay and two freelance journalists, British national Andy Ball and Cambodian Meng Kroypunlok, were forced to leave the Preah Roka forest community in Preah Vihear province by environmental ministry rangers while reporting on deforestation.

The journalists were escorted out of the forest and released without being detained. “We were told we weren’t allowed to be in the forest as we hadn’t asked for permission from the authorities,” Flynn said.

Flynn had gone to film the community’s patrol as part of Mongabay’s “Chasing Deforestation” video series. He chose Preah Roka because it was a safer forest to embed in a patrol through the nearby Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary.

Flynn said he had informed the rights group Licadho of his mission in advance. He told CamboJA that Licadho then spoke with a network of civil society organizations (CSOs). This led to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) country office speaking directly with the Preah Vihear provincial administration. The administration agreed not to detain the three journalists.

“If we hadn’t managed to alert NGOs, we might have faced the police or even the courts,” Flynn said.

Source: CamboJA interviewed Gerry Flynn



**Type of Harassment:
Physical intimidation**

Key Updates on Cambodia's Journalist/Media Situation

I. Government Ends Facebook private sector partnership, expels company's representative

After Prime Minister Hun Sen had his Facebook account suspended for threatening political opponents, the government announced on Saturday that Facebook's representatives would be expelled from the country.

The social media site would be required to "stop all activities such as company representation, communication with the Royal Government and private sector partnerships in Cambodia," the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications stated in a letter posted on its Facebook page.

The ministry cited "irregularities in the services of Facebook for users in Cambodia" including fake accounts, risk of private data, disinformation and "interference in the country's political affairs."

Hun Sen had previously warned he may shut down the entire platform's operations in Cambodia, but in the end only deleted his own account of over 14 million followers.

"I am not stupid to shut down Facebook when people have been using it for connection and to get this news," he said in a video published on government-aligned media Friday.

Hun Sen said he was switching to Telegram because there were too many fake Facebook accounts with his name and he was concerned about hackers.

"So there is no reason I need to use Facebook to cause any bad luck," he said.

The day before, the Oversight Board of Facebook's parent company Meta had suspended Hun Sen's account for six months.

But the extent to which the government's decision to cut public and private sector ties to Facebook would be enforced, and its resulting impact on Cambodians relying on Facebook for internet access and economic needs, remains unclear.

In 2022, there were more than 11 million Facebook users out of Cambodia's 16.5 million citizens, according to data aggregator DataReportal.

Many leading telecommunications firms offer Facebook-linked promotions. Cambodia's second largest mobile company Smart advertises unlimited data on the social media site for \$2 a day. Some Smart users automatically had Facebook profiles created when they registered with the company.

“Knowingly becoming part of the Facebook community is one of the key drivers for mobile internet usage, so it is our aim to make it as easy as possible and as affordable as possible to use Facebook,” former Smart Axiata CEO Thomas Hundt said in an undated press statement on the company’s site. Smart did not respond to requests for comment about whether such promotions would be affected by the ministry’s statement.

The Minister of Posts and Telecommunications Chea Vandet declined to comment and referred questions to secretary of state So Visoth, who could not be reached.

A Meta spokesperson told CamboJA: “We don’t have any comments at this time.”

Source: <https://cambojanews.com/government-ends-facebook-private-sector-partnerships-expels-companys-representative/>

II. Civil society calls for VOD to be reinstated during Press Day remarks

Ahead of World Press Freedom Day, civil society groups called on the government to allow the independent media outlet VOD to reopen, noting that the country’s press freedom continues to worsen.

“I hope the Prime Minister will kindly consider [reopening VOD],” said Cambodia Center for Human Rights executive director Chak Sopheap during a panel discussion to discuss press freedom in Phnom Penh on May 2, one day before World Press Freedom Day.

“[We] can say that it was one mistake that VOD committed wrong, but VOD has already apologized,” she said.

In February, Prime Minister Hun Sen gave VOD 72 hours — later shortened to 24 hours — to issue a retraction and apology for a February 9 Khmer language report stating that his son, Hun Manet, had signed an authorization of aid to Turkey. Though the outlet issued both an apology and retraction, its license was revoked on February 13.

Speaking to participants at Tuesday’s event, Information Ministry spokesperson Meas Sophorn insisted that the shutdown of VOD was not a reflection of broader issues surrounding press freedom. “I would like to affirm that the shutdown of VOD does not kill press freedom in Cambodia,” he said, claiming that in the case of VOD, the government was simply following the law.

But advocates insist VOD did nothing to justify having their license revoked and say that the closure has had a chilling effect for other Cambodian media outlets.

“After ordering to close VOD, how many media outlets dare to report about the demonstrations and strikes?” said Cambodia Center for Independent Media’s acting executive director Chhan Sokunthea. She added that since the shutdown, few media institutions are reporting on “sensitive issues” like land disputes, natural resource grabs, and worker protests.

“As we know, near elections independent media are always restricted or closed,” Sokhunthea said.

Source: <https://cambojanews.com/civil-society-calls-for-vod-to-be-reinstated-during-press-day-remarks/>

III. Concerns raised over shrinking online freedom

A defender of digital rights worldwide has raised concerns about governments in the region increasingly introducing legislation that give them excessive authority to censor content online and block individual content or entire websites based on a variety of arbitrary justifications.

Michael Caster, ARTICLE 19’s Asia Digital Programme Manager, said, “We see this being attempted in multiple countries in the region. I guess it’s still going as there has been a growing trend of governments around the world attempting to interfere with the Internet. This interference can take multiple forms.”

Caster spoke at Phnom Penh Internet Forum on Thursday and raised concerns about censorship and the suppression of information that is considered to be objectionable or harmful. This can be done by blocking websites, censoring content, or arresting and imprisoning people for expressing their views online.

Caster noted that there are a number of things that can be done to address these trends. Governments should repeal laws that restrict freedom of expression and access to information. They should also ensure that their security forces do not interfere with the internet.

“This is addressing a legitimate concern, the spread of harmful or potentially harmful disinformation or information manipulation. However, the response to this concern contradicts human rights principles. We need solutions that are grounded in human rights to effectively address these issues and concerns,” Caster said.

In Thailand, the Computer-Related Crimes Act (CRCA) has been used to target individuals who have expressed critical or dissenting views online. For example, people have been sentenced to multiple years in prison for using hashtags on Facebook that were critical of the monarchy.

In Vietnam, the Penal Code has been used to target individuals who have shared or disseminated information that is critical of the government or the Communist Party.

Caster said that Vietnam is an example of the manipulation of the penal code to stifle freedom of expression. Under a single article of the code, individuals have faced severe sentences of up to 20 years for simply sharing or disseminating “anti-state propaganda.”

Additionally, people have been handed lengthy prison terms ranging from eight to 16 years primarily for expressing their opinions online, particularly on platforms such as Facebook.

In addition to censorship, governments are also restricting the right to privacy by requiring accurate name verification for social media accounts and SIM cards. These efforts are often justified by claims that they are necessary to prevent criminal activity. However, real name verification infringes on the ability to engage online anonymously, which is essential for protecting the right to freedom of expression, he added.

He said the Special Rapporteurs of the Human Rights Council have stated that the ability to express oneself anonymously online provides a degree of protection that encourages and protects the exercise of the right to freedom of expression. This is particularly important in societies where journalists, lawyers, and other human rights defenders may be at risk of reprisals for their work.

“We also need to keep in mind the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. While these principles are not hard law, they are a set of best practices that outline the corporate responsibility of the private sector, especially tech companies, to protect human rights,” Caster said.

Nop Vy, Executive Director of the Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA), said at the forum that some of the laws currently in place still need to fully support internet freedom.

“If we take a closer look, Cambodia does not have laws that fully protect, support, and provide access to the internet for users so they can fully utilize their digital rights.”

Source: <https://kiripost.com/stories/concerns-raised-over-shrinking-online-freedom>

IV. Publisher released on bail after three months in pretrial detention

Oung Thabvang, the publisher of Khmer Cheay Den news, was released from prison on May 10, after being arrested on February 12 and sent to prison two days later in Banteay Meanchey province. He was charged with two cases: incitement and document fraud.

Thabvang's son and a Licadho official confirmed his release. However, he remains placed under the court's supervision.

Thun Chin, the regional coordinator of human rights for Licadho, told CamboJA that Thabvang had published a series of reports about corruption in the provincial health department and the taxation office. He was sued by officials from these departments for incitement and defamation. He was also charged with forging documents to obtain a property title in Poipet.

Source: CamboJA interviewed Thabvang's son and Licadho official

V. Cambodia falls down 2023 press freedom index

Cambodia's press freedom ranking in 2023 dropped as the government continues to persecute the independent media outlets, according to report by Reporters Without Border released on World Press Freedom Day on May 3, 2023. Cambodia ranked 147 out of 180 countries, down from 142 in 2022.

The country's overall score was down one point from 43 in 2022 to 42 in 2023. In Asia Pacific, RSF noted Cambodia placed higher than Vietnam, Myanmar and Laos.

"The democratic transition that started at the end of the 1980s allowed the emergence of a press that flourished until the long-serving Prime Minister Hun Sen launched a ruthless war against independent journalism before the 2018 elections," the report said of Cambodia. "Radio stations and newspapers were silenced, newsrooms purged, journalists prosecuted – leaving the independent media sector devastated," said RSF, adding that Hun Sen has used similar tactics ahead of elections this year.

RSF said The Phnom Penh Post lost its independence after it was bought in 2018 by a tycoon with close ties to the prime minister. A few months later, more than 30 independent radio stations were forced to shut down. Among them was Voice of Democracy, whose programs were re-transmitted by local stations, thereby playing a major role in the dissemination of independent information, especially in the countryside.

Source: <https://rsf.org/en/country/cambodia>




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