



សមាគមសម្ព័ន្ធអ្នកសារព័ត៌មានកម្ពុជា
Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association



Journalism Situation in Cambodia

Quarterly Monitoring Report

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I. Introduction and Summary

Journalists continue to face harassment as they attempt to report on sensitive issues and events occurring in Cambodia. Unfortunately, this quarter, a widespread pattern of legal and physical intimidation continued to plague the media sector.

At CamboJA, we believe it is essential to report on these instances of harassment. By shining a light on these challenges, CamboJA hopes to foster an environment where freedom of expression and freedom of speech are available to all journalists, allowing them to report without fearing for their safety, or the safety of those around them.

The quarterly report from CamboJA serves as a crucial tool for recording and evaluating trends and developments in the state of press freedom in Cambodia. It includes brief summaries of incidents and news updates related to press freedom over the period of January-March 2024.

Freedom of the press is the cornerstone of every democracy. Independent media outlets and journalists act as watchdogs — holding those in power accountable, promoting transparency, and encouraging the free flow of information from diverse perspectives. Freedom of the press empowers citizens by providing them with accurate and reliable information.

This quarter, CamboJA recorded ten cases of harassment against 18 journalists. This included seven instances of legal intimidation, such as lawsuits; one case of physical violence, in which three online journalists were severely beaten while reporting on gambling; and two cases of journalists benignly restricted from reporting in a public place.

The journalists were physically assaulted by people gambling in Banteay Meanchey province's PoiPet town. No action has been taken against the alleged assailants as of April 14. This is an egregious example of impunity for those who commit violence against journalists. Assaults should never happen for any reason, and authorities must take action against those who seek to intimidate journalists with violence.

Significant developments we recorded this quarter include the shutdown of the country's oldest English-language newspaper, the Phnom Penh Post, and the closure of Lotus radio.

The Ministry of Information is finalizing the long-overdue draft law on access to information, known as the "A2I draft law", as highlighted in its work direction for 2024. The draft law is currently being reviewed by the Ministry of Justice, according to documents viewed by CamboJA. The government has stalled for years on approving and implementing such a law.

During the reporting period, we recorded one online media outlet's license revoked by the Ministry of Information. The revocation came just a month after its publisher received legal threats after it exposed an alleged corruption involving the director of the Stung Treng provincial health department.

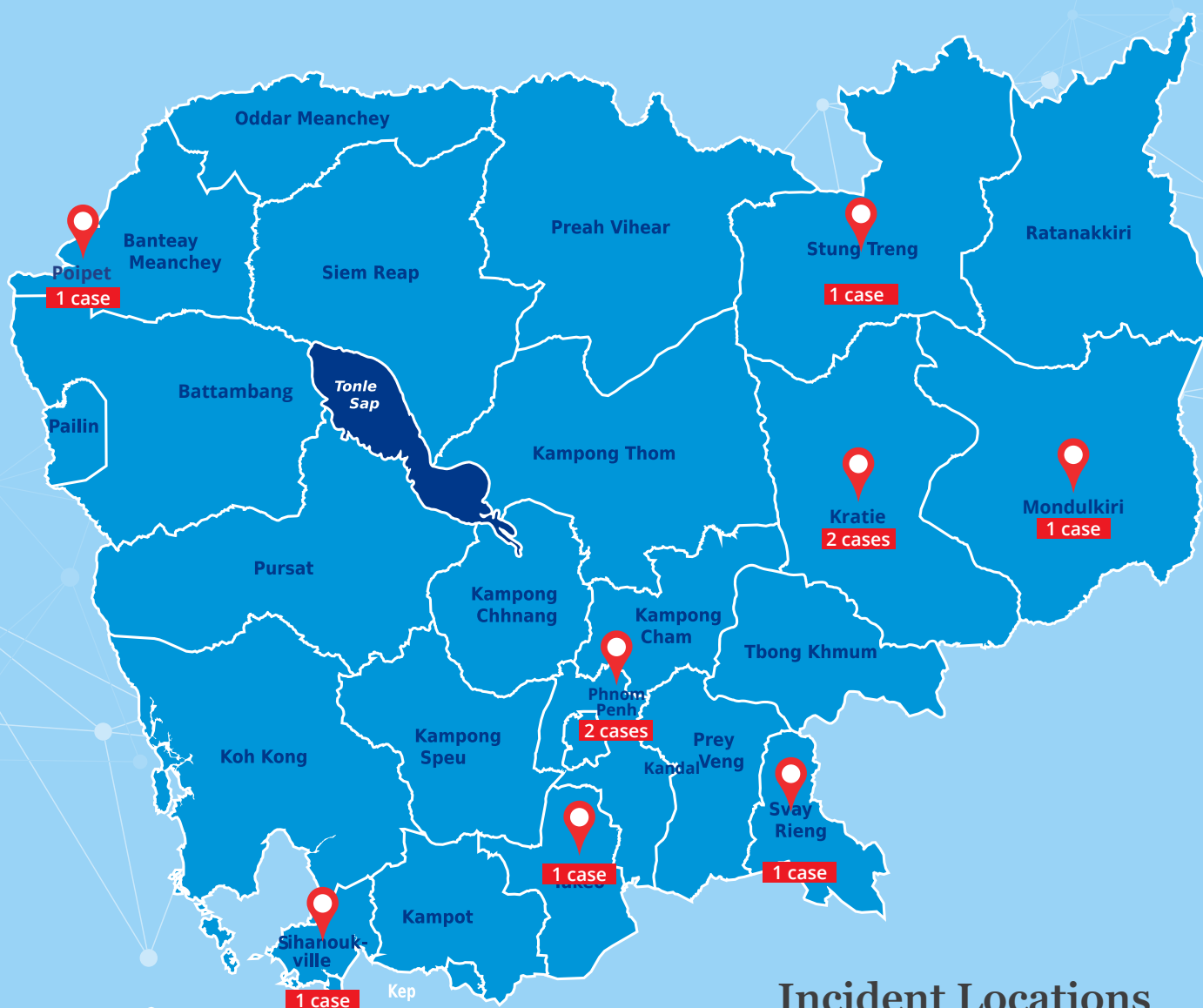
The Ministry of Information also introduced five indicators in preparation of the digital economy, including continuing to develop media infrastructure, both traditional and modern, and providing technical and professional training of journalism.

The publisher of Khmer Cheay Den news was sentenced to 6 months in prison on January 25, 2024, and fined 2 million riel, but the sentence was suspended. He was arrested on February 12, 2023, on charges of incitement and document fraud, then sent to prison two days later in Banteay Meanchey province. However, he was released from prison on May 10 after spending three months in pre-trial detention.

II. This Quarter in Context

Summary of All Incidents of Harassment Against Journalists Recorded From January to March 2024

Type of Harassment	Number of Case	Number of Affected Journalists
Physical harassment	One case of physical harassment	Three journalists beaten up while reporting on a gambling activity
Legal harassment	Seven cases of legal intimidation	Ten journalists were sued /summoned, while three were detained for questioning
Digital harassment	No digital harassment was recorded during the quarter	
Restriction/discrimination	Two cases of Restriction	At least five journalists faced restriction or barred from reporting/covering news



Incident Locations

18
Mar

Kratie Province

Radio journalist summoned for questioning over alleged incitement

2
Mar

Poipet Town

Three journalists beaten up while reporting on a gambling activity

28
Feb

Takeo Province

Online journalist sued by private company for alleged reputational damage

26
Feb

Mondulkiri Province

Two journalists summoned by Mondulkiri authorities over report on illegal logging

18
Feb

Stung Treng Province

Stung Treng's provincial health department threatens legal action against online journalist

17
Feb

Preah Sihanouk Province

Three online journalists detained for questioning while reporting on a land dispute

16
Feb

Phnom Penh

Publisher of online TV sued by military officer for defamation and incitement

Feb

Phnom Penh

Journalists restricted from covering news at the Court of Appeal

24
Jan

Kratie Province

Online journalist in Kratie sued for defamation after reporting on land dispute

4
Jan

Svay Rieng Province

Online journalist barred from reporting at a border checkpoint

III. Incidents Reported This Quarter

At least 10 online journalists were sued /summoned this quarter, while three were detained and three other journalists were severely beaten and hospitalized. One publisher of an online media outlet was barred from reporting at a public border checkpoint, while other four journalists were restricted from covering news at the Court of Appeal.

The Ministry of Information revoked the media license of Life and Sport News, accusing the outlet's owner of "severely" violating the professionalism and journalism ethics, failing to follow the ministry's advice, and violating a legal document.

1. Radio journalist summoned for questioning over alleged incitement



Kratie provincial court building on April 22, 2024. (Photo supplied)

March 18, 2024, Kratie province

A freelance journalist from Women's Community Voice Radio in Kratie province was summoned by the provincial court for questioning after he reported on a protest by indigenous people against local environmental authorities.

The journalist was accused of inciting people to burn down the environmental office during a protest on August 5, 2023, in Sre Chis commune, Ou Krieng Senchey district.

He was first questioned by the Ministry of Environment in Phnom Penh on August 16, 2023, with eight other villagers. During the meeting with the ministry, a ministry official agreed to remove his name from the list of accused. But on March 2, 2024, he was summoned to appear before the provincial court for questioning on March 18, 2024.

He said the provincial court's investigative judge asked him to submit documents to prove he was a journalist.

"On the day of the incident, people in the village told me that many people were gathering at the environmental office, so I went with them to cover the event," he said. "When I arrived there, the office was already on fire, so I took pictures and videos."

At the time, he said, he brought his press card to show that he is a journalist.

The report was broadcast and published on Women’s Community Voice Radio in Kratie.

“I believe that this is a threat because they know I work as a journalist and have reported on some issues in the community that affect the authorities,” he said, adding that he has previously reported on environmental issues and land disputes.

Type of harassment: Legal intimidation

Source: CamboJA interviewed with affected journalist

2. Three journalists beaten up while reporting on a gambling activity

March 2, 2024, , Poipet town

Three journalists from Sameang Hot News in Banteay Meanchey were allegedly assaulted by a group of people while preparing to report live on Facebook about gambling activity in PoiPet town.

Reporters from Sameang Hot News told CamboJA that they received information on March 1 about illegal gambling activities in Phsar Kandal commune, and later that day observed it taking place.

A journalist from Sameang Hot News said that on March 2, eight journalists from three different institutions went to the same location at about 8 p.m.. After taking some pictures and preparing to report live, a group of people approached the journalists and started beating some of them using sticks and rocks.



Three journalists who were beaten up, filed complaint at Phsar Kandal commune police Poipet. (Photo supplied)

Their equipment — including two smartphones, two tripods, two walkie-talkies and two cars — were damaged. Video clips of the incident showed the journalists being beaten up by a group of people. One journalist sustained a broken hand and another a broken tooth, they told CamboJA.

The journalists immediately filed a complaint with the commune police, but no action was taken.

The publisher of Sameang Hot News told CamboJA that the journalists filed a complaint with the Poi Pet police after commune police failed to take action.

A Poi Pet police officer told CamboJA that the journalists were asked to go in for a meeting on March 9, based on their complaint, but they did not appear and asked to meet on March 11 instead. The officer said the journalists again did not appear for the second meeting.

According to the journalist, he did not go to the meeting because he did not receive an official letter from the police.

Meanwhile, the police said the case was sent to the provincial court on March 13 for further action.

Type of harassment: Physical assault

Source: CamboJA interviewed with affected journalist

<http://www.meatophoum.com/article/7417.html>

3. Online journalist sued by private company for alleged reputational damage

February 28, 2024, , Takeo province

On February 28, 2024, the editor-in-chief of Penh Chet Media was sued by a private company in Takeo province over reporting on suspicions that the company was illegally packaging cigarettes in a factory.

The editor-in-chief told CamboJA the complaint was made on the day of the news report. He said before the complaint was made, he was asked by other online journalists to remove the article in exchange for money, but he refused.

The editor said he ultimately deleted the article at the request of the provincial Department of Industry, Mines and Energy. He said the legal dispute ended after he removed the story.

Recounting his experience, the editor-in-chief said on February 25, 2024, he received information from a source that the factory was producing counterfeit cigarettes and packing them into boxes with Chinese lettering for export.

On February 27, he visited the factory in Bati district to investigate. At the location, he met Ker Monydeth, who identified himself as the factory's security chief and said it was operating legally.

The journalist did not find evidence of illegal activity, but said because he received the information from a trusted source, he decided to publish the story as he wanted relevant authorities to investigate.

The article, seen by CamboJA before it was removed, wrote that the factory was closely guarded and journalists were not allowed to take photos.

In a hand-written complaint filed with the Bati district police on February 27, seen by CamboJA, Ker Monydeth said a group of four journalists went to the factory, LKZ Hua Sheng Tian (Cambodia) Tobacco Ltd, and asked him for information about the business.

In the complaint, Monydeth said he read the story published in Penh Chet Media on February 28, which he claimed had damaged the company's reputation.

On February 29, the Bati district administration released a statement, claiming that the report was baseless and had seriously impacted the authority's reputation as well as the company's. The administration said the company was legally registered in October 2021.

Type of harassment: Legal intimidation

Source: CamboJA interviewed with affected journalist

4. Two journalists summoned by Mondulkiri authorities over report on illegal logging

February 26, 2024, , Mondulkiri province

Officials in Mondulkiri province summoned two journalists for questioning regarding their report on illegal logging in Keo Seima district.

The summons issued by the Keo Seima district administrative office asked both journalists, who live in Prey Veng province, to present themselves at the office on February 28, 2024.

The journalists from BPNC News and Dermkrosang Daily told CamboJA that they traveled to Mondulkiri on February 27, 2024, but when they arrived there, they were told that the meeting was suspended without reason.

The journalist from Dermkrosang Daily said he had written an article about an illegal logging activity involving a group of timber dealers in Keo Seima district and dropped it in a Telegram group for journalists.

On February 24, the article was published by another media outlet, BPNC News. But he later asked BPNC News to remove the article after he found a mistake in the report, relating to the location of illegal logging activity. In the original version, he wrote that the crime occurred in O’Raing district, but when it was published, it mentioned both O’Raing and Keo Seima district.

BPNC News publisher told CamboJA that he agreed to delete the article as per the journalist’s request two hours later. On February 26, he and the journalist from Dermkrosang Daily received a letter from Keo Seima district administrative office seeking clarification on the illegal logging report.

On March 1, 2024, CamboJA contacted Keo Seima district governor San Kim Eab to ask why the journalists were summoned for questioning regarding their report. However, he refused to comment, asking the CamboJA staff to instead meet him at the district hall and to bring along his press card. CamboJA declined the invitation.

Type of harassment: Legal intimidation

Source: CamboJA interviewed with affected journalist

5. Stung Treng's provincial health department threatens legal action against online journalist

February 19, 2024, , Stung Treng province

An online journalist at Life and Sport News was allegedly threatened with legal action after the journalist wrote about claims of corruption involving the president of the Stung Treng provincial health department.

On February 16, Life and Sport News published a report on irregularities involving the purchase of equipment, which were allegedly over-priced. The report cited an invoice from the supplier and included an interview with an official in the department, who asked not to be named.

On February 19, 2024, the provincial health department issued a letter rejecting the report, saying that the information in the publication was not properly fact-checked, and that the journalist disseminated false information and lacked professionalism.

The provincial health department said legal action would be taken against the media outlet if it refused to make a correction.

The publisher of Life and Sport told CamboJA by phone on February 26 that the report was based on facts and supported by sufficient evidence. He refused to correct the report and said he would rather wait and see what legal action will be taken against him.

"The letter does not specifically mention what points need to be corrected," he said.

Type of harassment: Legal intimidation

Source: CamboJA interviewed with affected journalist

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=356295490631971>

6. Three online journalists detained for questioning while reporting on a land dispute

February 17, 2024, , Preah Sihanouk province

On February 17, 2024, three online reporters from San Prum news were detained for questioning by police for 10 hours after they conducted an interview with families involved in a land dispute in Preah Sihanouk province.

One of the journalists told CamboJA that his team had received information from people in Stueng Hav district about a protest regarding a land dispute.

On February 17, his team visited the area and interviewed the affected people. According to the journalist, people asked him to do a live report on Facebook, but he refused, saying that he would collect information first before publishing.

After 10 minutes of interviewing the people, several district police officers arrived on the scene and blocked the road. The journalists approached the authorities and asked about the dispute, but the police refused to answer and asked them to go to the police station to get information. The journalists went to the police station, where they were promptly detained for questioning.

One of the harassed journalists told CamboJA that they were detained for questioning from 10:30 a.m. until 8 p.m.

During the detention, police forced them to have their mugshots taken and place their thumbprint on a document agreeing not to publish the report, or risk facing legal action.

The journalist said police told them journalists from Phnom Penh have no right to cover news in the province.

The next day, their mugshots were disseminated over Telegram and Facebook.

The journalists said the public dissemination of their mugshots by district police violated their rights and harmed their dignity as they did not commit any crime. They filed a complaint with the Ministry of Information, but have received no updates about follow-up actions.

Type of harassment: Legal intimidation

Interviewed by: CamboJA interviewed with affected journalist

7. Publisher of online TV sued by military officer for defamation and incitement

February 16, 2024, Phnom Penh

A military officer sued the publisher of TN TV for defamation and incitement after the journalist published a report on an issue involving the officer and a woman who allegedly loaned him \$1 million.

On February 7, 2024, TN TV published an article about a dispute between a three-star general living in Kampong Speu province and the lender.

Based on the report, the military officer allegedly borrowed \$1 million from the woman in October 2021 and failed to pay it back. The report included pictures of the military officer, copies of the loan agreement, and other documents.

Following the news report, the officer's lawyer sent a letter to TN TV on February 8, requesting it delete the article. The lawyer accused the journalist of exaggerating information with the intent to defame and incite, and of failing to seek comment or clarification from his client.

The publisher told CamboJA that he was unable to contact the general before publication, and said he refused to delete the article because it was based on solid information and evidence.

Having refused to delete the article, the publisher received a summons from the Phnom Penh Municipal Court on February 16, notifying him of a lawsuit filed by the military officer against him for defamation and incitement.

On March 12, the publisher went with his lawyer to court for questioning and stood by his refusal to delete the article.

"I told the court that the information published in the news report is true because I obtained all the documents from the lender," he said. "I asked the court to drop the case because I have not defamed and incited [anyone]."

The general also filed a complaint with the Ministry of Information calling for the revocation of the outlet's media license.

On March 6, the ministry invited the publisher to meet and talk about practicing professionalism and observing journalism ethics. The military officer's lawyer was also present at the meeting with the ministry.

The publisher told CamboJA that during the meeting, the military officer's lawyer insisted that the media license be revoked.

Type of harassment: Legal intimidation

Source: CamboJA interviewed with affected journalist

<https://tinyurl.com/m6nxc3sy/>

8. Online journalist in Kratie sued for defamation after reporting on land dispute

January 24, 2024, Kratie province

The publisher of New Network News was sued for defamation by a man apparently representing a rubber company, following a report on a land dispute in Kratie province's Snuol district.

According to a complaint filed by Prum Chanthea at a provincial court on January 24, 2024, the journalist was accused of publishing false information and asked to pay a compensation of up to \$10,000 to the plaintiff.

New Network News published two reports about the protest against land clearing on January 12 and 18, 2024, which were reported live on Facebook.

The publisher told CamboJA that in 2023, a group of land brokers came and pressured villagers to sell their farmland, warning that after the national election, the farmland would be seized without compensation because the local residents were illegally occupying state land.

On January 18, he went live on Facebook to report on the clearing of three hectares of cashew farmland, which belonged to two families. At the time, he was informed by villagers that Prum Chanthea was behind the land clearing.

In an agreement letter dated January 23, obtained by CamboJA, Eastern Rubber (Cambodia) Co Ltd agreed to pay compensation to the two families for the damage to the crops.

Adhoc's coordinator in Kratie province told CamboJA that Prum Chanthea is a representative of Eastern Rubber (Cambodia) Co., Ltd.

He said Chanthea had urged villagers to sell their land to the company, but people refused, resulting in protests. He said three other villagers have also been sued by Prum Chanthea.

Type of harassment: Legal intimidation

Source: CamboJA interviewed with affected journalist

9. Online journalist barred from reporting at a border checkpoint

January 4, 2024, , Svay Rieng province

A military officer sued the publisher of TN TV for defamation and incitement after the On January 4, 2024, a journalist for online outlet Luos Seng News was banned by border police from covering a story at the corridor of Bavet border checkpoints in Svay Rieng province, where goods are transported between Cambodia and Vietnam.

He told CamboJA via Telegram that he went there to report on the issue of goods traffic crossing the border from Vietnam to Cambodia. However, he was asked by police to show his media license and a permission letter issued by the provincial information department.

In a video posted on Luos Seng News, at least six policemen were shown talking to the journalist and taking pictures of him. In the video, the journalist said he was asked by police to leave the corridor.

"When I arrived there, I had not taken any pictures or videos yet but at the time, about seven policemen arrived and asked if I had a permission letter to cover the news," he said.

"The police just told me that journalists are not allowed to enter and report there," he added.

Type of harassment: Restriction

Source: CamboJA interviewed with affected journalist

10. Journalists restricted from covering news at the Court of Appeal

February, 2024, Phnom Penh

Journalists from several news outlets including Radio France International (RFI), CamboJA and Voice of America (VOA) were not permitted into the courtroom for a hearing involving Kem Sokha, a former leader of the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party.

Journalists who had pre-registered for the hearing were told that the courtroom was full and only people with court permission letters were allowed in.

The Court of Appeal in Phnom Penh held the first hearing in Kem Sokha's appeal of his conviction for treason and conspiracy with a foreign power on January 30, 2024. The second hearing was on February 8, and the third on February 22.

CamboJA reporters had registered for all three hearings, but a court official informed reporters a day after the registration that they would not be able to attend due to space constraints.

This not only affected CamboJA reporters, but also reporters from VOA and RFI who were rejected from entering the courtroom.

Local rights group Licadho, which monitors court hearing procedures, issued a flash info update noting that the public was restricted from the hearing, including journalists.

Prior to the first hearing, security was tight around the Court of Appeal, where dozens of police officers, military police and guards were stationed. Entrance to the courthouse was blocked, preventing members of the public and media from accessing the court building.

According to Licadho, both uniform and plainclothes police officers and security guards were deployed at the court and took photographs and videos of individuals in the area.

Type of harassment: Restriction

Interviewed by: CamboJA interviewed with affected journalist

License Revocation

Life and sport's license revoked, accused of violating professionalism

Life and Sport News's license was revoked by the Ministry of Information for "severely" violating professionalism and journalism ethics.

According to the ministry statement, the license was revoked on March 15, 2024, because the media outlet owner did not follow the ministry's advice and violated a legal document.

The ministry said the outlet runs two websites and a Facebook page. One website www.lifeandsports.news has been blocked but www.lifeandsport.online and the Facebook page remain active.

The publisher of Life and Sport News told CamboJA that the ministry sent him a letter revoking the license on March 18. He said he did not receive any prior warning.

The ministry spokesman told CamboJA that the revocation was done after it received many complaints that the media outlet was violating professionalism.

In February, CamboJA documented the legal threats against Life and Sport News, after it exposed alleged corruption involving the president of the Stung Treng provincial health department.

On February 19, the provincial health department issued a letter rejecting the report, saying that the information in the publication was not properly fact-checked, that the journalist disseminated false information and lacked professionalism.

The department warned that if the outlet refused to make a correction, legal action would be taken.

Life and Sport's publisher told CamboJA that the report was grounded in facts they obtained, and the outlet was thereby refusing to correct it.



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- បានឃើញអនុក្រឹត្យលេខ ៧១/អនក្រ.បក ចុះថ្ងៃទី១៣ ខែកក្កដា ឆ្នាំ២០០៧ ស្តីពីការកែសម្រួលអង្គនាយកដ្ឋានរដ្ឋបាល និងសោតទស្សន៍ ជាអង្គនាយកដ្ឋានរដ្ឋបាល និងហិរញ្ញវត្ថុ និងអង្គនាយកដ្ឋានព័ត៌មាន និងសោតទស្សន៍ របស់ក្រសួងព័ត៌មាន
- បានឃើញប្រកាសលេខ ៣១៩ ព.ម ប្រក ចុះថ្ងៃទី១៣ ខែសីហា ឆ្នាំ២០២០ របស់ក្រសួងព័ត៌មាន
- បានឃើញលិខិតអនុញ្ញាតលេខ ១៦១ ព.ម.ល.អ ចុះថ្ងៃទី១៣ ខែធ្នូ ឆ្នាំ២០២១ របស់អង្គនាយកដ្ឋានព័ត៌មាន និងសោតទស្សន៍
- យោងតាមស្ថានភាពជាក់ស្តែង

សម្រេច

ប្រការ១: លុបប្រកាសលេខ ៣១៩ ព.ម ប្រក ចុះថ្ងៃទី១៣ ខែសីហា ឆ្នាំ២០២០ របស់ក្រសួងព័ត៌មាន ដែលអនុញ្ញាតឱ្យលោក ជឿង ធួន កាន់អត្តសញ្ញាណប័ណ្ណសញ្ជាតិខ្មែរលេខ ០១០៩១២៣៣១ ចុះថ្ងៃទី២១ ខែវិច្ឆិកា ឆ្នាំ២០១៤ ដែលមានអាសយដ្ឋាននៅផ្ទះលេខ ៦៥៧ ភូមិចោមចៅ សង្កាត់ចោមចៅ ខណ្ឌពោធិ៍សែនជ័យ រាជធានីភ្នំពេញ ជាម្ចាស់អាជីវកម្មគេហទំព័រឈ្មោះ www.lifeandsports.news និង www.lifeandsport.online អាសយដ្ឋានទីស្នាក់ការស្ថិតនៅផ្ទះលេខ ៦៥៧ ភូមិចោមចៅ សង្កាត់ចោមចៅ ខណ្ឌពោធិ៍សែនជ័យ រាជធានីភ្នំពេញ ដោយម្ចាស់អង្គការបានរំលោភបំពានយ៉ាងធ្ងន់ធ្ងរនូវក្រមសីលធម៌វិជ្ជាជីវៈសារព័ត៌មាន មិនអនុវត្តតាមនីតិវិធី មិនទទួលយកការណែនាំ និងបន្តបំពានលើលិខិតបទដ្ឋានគតិយុត្តិជាធរមាន។

ប្រការ២: ប្រកាស និងបទប្បញ្ញត្តិទាំងឡាយណាដែលផ្ទុយនឹងខ្លឹមសារប្រកាសនេះ ត្រូវទុកជានិរាករណ៍។

ប្រការ៣: អង្គនាយកដ្ឋានព័ត៌មាន និងសោតទស្សន៍ អង្គនាយកដ្ឋានរដ្ឋបាល និងហិរញ្ញវត្ថុ ឧទ្ធរណ៍យក្រសួងព័ត៌មាន មន្ទីរព័ត៌មានរាជធានីភ្នំពេញ សាមីខ្លួន និងសមត្ថកិច្ចពាក់ព័ន្ធ ត្រូវទទួលបន្ទុកអនុវត្តប្រកាសនេះតាមការកិច្ចរៀងៗខ្លួន ចាប់ពីថ្ងៃចុះហត្ថលេខាតទៅ។

- ចម្លងជូន៖
- ទីស្តីការគណៈរដ្ឋមន្ត្រី
 - ក្រសួងមហាផ្ទៃ (អង្គស្នងការដ្ឋាននគរបាលជាតិ)
 - ក្រសួងសេដ្ឋកិច្ច និងហិរញ្ញវត្ថុ
 - ក្រសួងការងារ និងបណ្តុះបណ្តាលវិជ្ជាជីវៈ
 - ក្រសួងប្រៃសណីយ៍ និងទូរគមនាគមន៍
 - រដ្ឋបាលខេត្តកំពង់ចាម ខេត្ត
 - មន្ទីរព័ត៌មានរាជធានី ខេត្ត
 - ដូចប្រការ៣ "ដើម្បីអនុវត្ត"
 - ឯកសារ - កាលប្បវត្តិ

រដ្ឋមន្ត្រី 

 លោក ត្រួត ត្រួត

IV. Feature: Journalists Concerned Over The Use of Criminal Code



Online journalist gave an interview with CamboJA in Koh Nhek, Mondulakiri. (CamboJA)

The Cambodian media landscape is undergoing a significant transformation, driven by the rapid rise of online platforms as traditional media slowly phases out.

Data from the Ministry of Information showed that there were more than 2,000 media outlets licensed by the ministry as of 2023. Of the amount, more than 930 are online platforms.

However, along with the rise of online media, the Criminal Code has become a powerful tool used to restrict press freedom.

CamboJA's research and advocacy team met five local journalists in Mondulakiri and Kratie province to document the issues and challenges faced by local journalists. Most said legal action against journalists is commonly used while they were reporting on sensitive issues, or disputes that implicate the authorities or other "powerful individuals".

The journalists, who asked not to be named, said they face similar issues and dare not report on sensitive issues, fearing harsh reprisals.

They also said they want to see the Press Law being used to penalize alleged professional misconduct, instead of the Criminal Code.

A journalist from HM TV news in Mondulakiri said he previously experienced intimidation and pressure from authorities when he reported on sensitive issues, such as the environment or issues that affect the authorities.

"We [journalists] are normally summoned by the local authorities for questioning and eventually asked to sign agreements to stop reporting on the issue," he said, adding that he was even questioned for highlighting farmers' problems.

As a result, he "does not dare" to report on sensitive issues now and chooses to only write about issues that have already been exposed or topics with a positive theme.

“We are not like real journalists because the local authorities want us to report positive [things] only. They tell us which issues we should report on and which ones we should not. We cannot do investigative stories,” he said.

Another journalist from BDN Online news, who has worked for 10 years in the field, said he was concerned about the use of criminal charges against journalists, though he has never faced legal action.

“I have seen many cases where they [powerful authorities] use the criminal code to penalize journalists who may have committed a professional mistake when the press law should be used instead,” he said.

The journalist, who has joined journalism training courses since 2017, believes that observing professionalism and journalism ethics reduces the risk of legal actions.

Impactful stories

In another case, a freelance journalist from Women’s Community Voice Radio in Kratie province was summoned for questioning by the provincial court after reporting on an issue involving indigenous people in Ou Krieng Senchey district. The people were protesting against environmental officials, which led to the burning of the environmental post in Sre Chis commune on August 5, 2023.

The journalist, an indigenous person himself, was accused of inciting the people to use violence against authorities. He was previously questioned by the Ministry of Environment in Phnom Penh on August 16, 2023, and later summoned by the provincial court for questioning on March 18, 2024.

He told CamboJA that while covering the protest, he had his press card on him and was taking pictures and videos, and interviewing protesters and authorities on the scene. The report was broadcast and published on Women’s Community Voice Radio in Kratie.

“I believe that this is a threat because they know I work as a journalist and have reported on some issues in the community that impact officials,” he said.

He has worked as a freelance journalist for more than a year now, and said he became a journalist to help people in his community.

Before the improvement of public service and roads, his community was rather poor and authorities always ignored people's requests, he said.

"But when I became a journalist and reported on the issues [in the area], some problems were solved. This includes the construction of new roads and the improvement of public service at the commune and district level," he said.

A risky job

In 2023, CamboJA recorded 32 cases of harassment, affecting at least 59 journalists (six of them women journalists). Most of the harassment cases involved intimidation by the government officers. At the time, four online journalists were imprisoned for different charges relating to their work.

According to the report, at least 34 journalists from 17 different online media outlets were subjected to dubious legal accusations in 2023, in which they were summoned to court, had their media license revoked, faced legal threats, or were imprisoned.

In the four-year period (2020-2023), CamboJA documented a total of 151 harassment cases against 281 journalists and media workers (21 of them women).

The shutdown of Voice of Democracy in February 2023, one of the country's most trusted independent media outlets, has had a profound effect on Cambodia's media sphere.

CamboJA was also threatened with possible legal action and license revocation last year by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries for publishing an article on the assault of a vocal critic of government policies.

Extortion charges

So far this year, Mondulhiri has seen among the highest number of cases of journalists facing legal actions, according to CamboJA's monitoring. Across the country, at least 15 journalists have been charged with "extortion" and summoned for questioning since the start of 2023.

Eight journalists, including two women, were arrested and charged in March 2024. Five were charged in October 2023, four of whom were placed in pre-trial detention for five months.

Two journalists in Prey Veng province were also summoned by Keo Seima district authorities in February for their report on illegal logging.

An online journalist in Kampong Thom province was charged with extortion under Articles 363 and 364 of the Criminal Code and sentenced to two years imprisonment in 2023. He denied the accusation, saying that the conviction was baseless and unjust as he had not committed the crime.

The complaint was allegedly based on four money transfers that the plaintiff sent him as evidence of extortion. He recently filed an appeal against the sentence.

Over in Mondulhiri province, a journalist from Norkor Meas GTV Online was charged along with four others with extortion in October 2023. He denied committing the crime and asked the court to drop the charges.

Why was he sued and charged

On March 5, CamboJA met the journalist in his home in Koh Nhek district. He told CamboJA that on October 21, 2023, he traveled about 100 kilometers from his home in Koh Nhek district to visit a friend, a journalist for CPM news, in Dakdam district.

When he arrived at his friend's home, he met three other online journalists who told him they were going to Koh Nhek district, where his house is. So, he asked them for a lift home so he could save the taxi fare. On the way to Koh Nhek, he said the journalists entered a family-run wood processing business site.

"I told them not to ask for money from anyone but they didn't listen to me," he said. "At the time, I was inside the car, and I did not know what they were talking about with the business owner. I didn't know how much money they got."

A moment later, the police arrived and asked the journalists, including him, to go to the district police station for questioning and sign an agreement to stop asking money from businesses in future.

He said the police questioned the four journalists and allowed them to go home but he refused to accept his involvement with the other journalists.

After being questioned, he said the journalists were released and returned to Mondulhiri town on the same day.

On October 22, 2023, he received information that the four journalists were wanted for arrest on allegations of extorting a Chinese mining firm in Keo Seima district.

The next day, he was sued by the owner of the wood processing business in Koh Nhek and was summoned by the provincial court for questioning. He was later charged for extortion under Articles 25, 363 and 364 of the Criminal Code but released on bail.

“I swear on my life and would even leave my two daughters as proof that I didn’t commit the crime,” he told CamboJA while sitting in his wooden house in Koh Nhek on March 5.

The journalist said he wanted to stop working but his publisher urged him to continue. His press card was renewed by Norkor Meas GTV Online on January 1 and is valid until December 31, 2024.

“Now I dare not report [on anything] because my case is still in the court,” he said. “I call for the charge against me to be dropped because I have not committed any crime.”

The other four journalists, who were interviewed by CamboJA said they were released on bail in March 2024. They also said the journalist from Norkor Mease GTV was not involved with the activity.

The issue of journalism ethics

Many online journalists are accused of misconduct and disregarding journalism ethics. Information Minister Neth Pheaktra has promised to improve the sector by addressing issues related to journalism ethics and professionalism.

On December 21, 2023, a letter was sent to the 20th Editor Forum themed “Media professionalism and ethics” where Prime Minister Hun Manet highlighted the importance of the media sector and journalists’ work. However, he said the industry practiced poor professionalism and journalistic ethics, especially online journalists, and called for more attention to drawing the public’s trust.

To strengthen journalism ethics, the Information Ministry issued an announcement in January urging online media outlets to register with them in a push to update the country’s digital media landscape.

In April, Neth Pheaktra revealed that as of March 31, 2023, more than 5,000 media outlets have applied for media licenses with the ministry. There are nearly 10,000 journalists operating in Cambodia currently, per the ministry.

With regards to journalism ethics, ministry spokesman Tep Asnarith called on journalists and media outlets to continue to respect professionalism and journalism ethics.

He said journalists need to have a good relationship with ministry spokespeople, authorities, and relevant parties, and respect the law and the profession.

“Journalists and media outlets need to actively promote and disseminate true information to ensure proper comprehension by the people,” he said. “The information must be balanced, professional and responsible in order to contribute to the development of the media sector.”

V. General Media Landscape:

1. Traditional media drying up in the digital edge

The Ministry of Information announced in February that it will resume publication of the state-owned newspaper, called “Kampuchea”, which will be published in two editions, Khmer and English. The reinstated paper will be run both in print and online.

At the same time, Cambodia’s oldest English-language newspaper, the Phnom Penh Post, stopped its print operation and laid off its staff due to the loss in revenue.

Lack of funds has also crippled other media outlets in Cambodia. On February 27, Lotus Radio, which had been operating since 2016, said it would stop its FM broadcast and shift their program online. They plan to use social media platforms like Facebook and Youtube instead.

Lotus Radio said during the eight-year broadcast, it has created educational content that increased people’s knowledge about issues such as recycling and Khmer culture. The radio station said the production of radio programs requires a lot of funds, and revenue was down. “We can’t continue, that is why we decided to stop from March 1.”

VI. Key Updates

1. Ministry of Information Finalizing Access to Information Draft Law

The Ministry of Information is finalizing the long-promised draft law on access to information, known as the “A2I draft law”, as highlighted in its work direction for 2024. The draft law is currently being reviewed by the Ministry of Justice, according to documents viewed by CamboJA.

Last year, then-Prime Minister Hun Sen promised that the A2I draft law would be passed after the election, or by 2025 at the latest.

The ministry’s commitment was made on the last page of its summary annual report 2023, which was obtained by CamboJA. Among its seven-point work directions was the part on “finishing the access to information draft law that is under review by the Ministry of Justice”.

Over the last five months, Information Minister Neth Pheaktra said his ministry has been working on a few tasks, including the preparation of documents in line with the evolution of society and digital context, and the development of ethical journalism standards.

Five indicators have been identified in preparation of the digital economy and the adoption of Industrial Revolution 4.0, Pheaktra mentioned at the closing of a two-day annual meeting.

Source: <http://tinyurl.com/yhxxn6e7>

2. Ministry of Information introduced five indicators for development media sector

The ministry introduced five indicators in preparation of the digital economy including continuing to develop media infrastructure, both traditional and modern, and providing technical and professional training for journalists.

Five indicators:

1. Transformation of analog-to-digital television systems to adapt to the evolution of technology and the common commitment of ASEAN.
2. Continuing to develop media infrastructure, both traditional and modern, including broadcast content.
3. Provide technical and professional training of journalism, focusing on cooperation with ministries, institutions, and development partners.
4. Fight against fake news by promoting cooperation with relevant ministries, institutions and international institutions to prevent from publishing/disseminating fake news in all forms.
5. Building the legal basis and strengthening the implementation of the law, which focused on the draft law on A2I, the amendment of the Press Law to adapt to the developments of the society and put in place measures to strengthen the implementation of journalism.

Source: <http://tinyurl.com/2p92zn59>

3. Publisher sentenced to six months in prison but released on bail

The publisher of Khmer Cheay Den news, was sentenced to 6 months in prison on January 25, 2024, and fined 2 million riel, but the sentence was suspended.

He was arrested on February 12, 2023, and sent to prison two days later in Banteay Meanchey province. However, he was released from prison on May 10 after being placed in pre-trial detention for three months.

He was charged with incitement and document fraud.

The regional coordinator of human rights for Licadho told CamboJA that the publisher 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.


VII. Recommendations

The government and relevant authorities should promote press freedom and respect for journalists' professional obligations, such as the privacy of sources, as well as showing a commitment to ending the harassment of journalists.

1. Refrain from bringing criminal charges against journalists in relation to their journalistic work, citizen journalists.
2. End impunity by promptly investigating, prosecuting and redressing cases of violence against journalists.
3. Provide dedicated support, training and resources to units tasked with investigating crimes against journalists, including on investigating such crimes in a gender-sensitive manner.
4. Immediately drop pending charges and review criminal sentences against journalists.
5. Immediately review prior decisions to revoke media licenses and reform the rules around media licensing so that media licenses can only be revoked by a court order.
6. Within the next two years, develop and implement training initiatives for law enforcement authorities on respecting the rights of journalists to report and record at protests and other public events.
7. Enact a broadcasting law that establishes an independent broadcasting authority and clear and neutral rules for the allocating broadcasting licenses, in line with international standard.
8. Enact an access to information law that aligns with international standards by the end of 2024.
9. Amend the Criminal Code to align with international freedom of expression standards, including to repeal or amend the incitement crimes (Art. 494, 495) and to repeal the lèse majesté offense (Art. 437-bis), public defamation (Art. 305) and public insult (Art. 307) Amend the Press Law to align with international standards, establish clear rules around press accreditation and press registration, and refrain from licensing online media.
10. Repeal Prakas of the Ministry of Information, which authorizes the government to revoke media licenses without judicial processes, violating press freedom principles and article 41 of Cambodian constitutional law.

Contact us

if you have information about harassment
or threats to journalists

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