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Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association



Journalism Situation in Cambodia

Quarterly Monitoring Report

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I. Introduction

CamboJA's quarterly reports on harassment of journalists are part of our ongoing effort to monitor the media landscape in Cambodia and provide stakeholders with a window into the setbacks and progress for independent journalism in the country.

Independent media took a major blow this quarter with the arrest of award-winning journalist Mech Dara, who was known for his extensive reporting on human trafficking and cyber scam compounds in Cambodia. The arrest has drawn rebuke from local and international civil society groups, media organizations, individual journalists, journalist clubs and foreign governments.

Dara has been charged with "incitement to disturb social security" over his social media posts from September and has been placed in pre-trial detention at Kandal provincial prison. He faces a maximum sentence of two years.

In our broader monitoring, we observe that legal action/intimidation remains a major concern for journalists attempting to report on sensitive issues, particularly those that involve power players in government and business.

The deteriorating media environment in the country, in which independent journalists and outlets regularly face harassment, comes as the government claims it is seeking to professionalize the sector.

The most significant development on this front was the August launch of the Charter for Professional Journalism by the Ministry of Information, which ostensibly aims to counter "fake news" and promote ethics in journalism. However, the lack of consultation with independent journalists has raised serious questions about the government's true intentions.

Independent UN experts [called on](#) the Ministry of information in September to suspend the charter, saying it “fails to incorporate a public interest override and to establish properly the main remedies for when the media makes factual errors, namely the rights of correction and reply.”

We also observed coordinated online campaigns attacking foreign-based media outlets by a group of Facebook accounts. Reporters Without Borders urged the government to do everything in its power to the end trolling campaigns targeting the country’s main exiled media outlets, and to allow these media to operate within the country once again.

At CamboJA, we proudly continue our work publishing unbiased reporting on Cambodia, and we believe it is crucial to shine a light on the challenges that make it so difficult for our colleagues.

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 includes brief summaries of incidents and news updates related to press freedom over the period from July to September 2024.

We also provide a deeper report on a journalist in Mondulkiri who authorities say died in traffic accident. But their handling of the case has left the cause of death in doubt for some of his colleagues.

II. Methodology

This report employed a qualitative method. Data on harassment cases against journalists was compiled based on reported cases in various media outlets, social media posts, and public announcements from courts. Cases were verified through desk review, CamboJA provincial network, monitoring the trial process and interviews with lawyers, affected journalists and their family members. In cases involving journalists accused of extortion, CamboJA counted them as harassment after we conducted an investigation and found evidence of threats, intimidation or other efforts to impair freedom of the press.

As a member of the regional coalition launched in December 2022 to jointly monitor attacks on news media in Southeast Asia (mainly Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Timor Leste, and Thailand), our monitoring framework was adapted in early 2023 for consistency with the regional indicators, which track journalists' safety issues based on three main dimensions — physical, digital, and legal safety. We also document actions that may potentially harm, intimidate, obstruct, or silence media workers due to their journalistic roles without legal or legitimate justification, or prevent press institutions or media workers from carrying out their journalistic duties in a safe and independent manner, as well as any development with potential negative impacts on press freedom.

Due to safety and security concerns, the names of affected journalists and other sources have been withheld from this report except in cases that have already been publicly disclosed by media and courts.

Scope and limitations

This report has some limitations and gaps. It does not necessarily include all harassment cases against journalists in this quarter, but only reported cases from July-September 2024 that were identified during CamboJA's research. It is likely that many additional cases went unreported, as journalists often face harassment in the provinces, where incidents are more likely to remain hidden due to limited resources for monitoring and legal assistance.

III. Summary of Incidents

In this quarter, CamboJA recorded **11** cases of harassment affecting **17** journalists. That included eight cases of legal action/intimidation and three cases of physical threats, including unlawful detention. Last quarter, we documented **seven** cases of harassment affecting 11 journalists, including six instances of legal threats.

During the first nine months of 2024, CamboJA has recorded **28** cases of harassment against **46** journalists. Of these cases, **21** were instances of legal action/intimidation. In the same period in 2023, we recorded **24** cases, and **9** cases of legal intimidation.

This 133 percent increase in cases of legal intimidation points to a very worrying trend. Criminal charges like incitements, extortion and defamation are increasingly being used against journalists, rather than using the civil process outlined in the Press Law.

- Mech Dara, a former VOD reporter known for his extensive reporting on human trafficking and cyber scam compounds in Cambodia, was arrested on September 30 and charged with “incitement to disturb social security” in relation to allegedly misleading social media posts. The arrest has drawn rebuke from local and international civil society groups, media organizations, individual journalists, journalist clubs and foreign governments. Dara has been placed in pre-trial detention at Kandal provincial prison and faces a maximum sentence of two years ^[1].
- An online journalist who had been sued by Kandal provincial authorities was charged with incitement to commit a felony under Article 494, 495 of the Criminal Code and was sentenced in August to one year in prison. The journalist was imprisoned for one month and fourteen days, with the remaining time suspended. A member of Neutral Press Association was arrested on July 6, after publishing an article criticizing local authorities for not cracking down on cockfighting and lotteries operating in a coffee shop. In the [article](#), published with pictures of provincial police and newly-appointed provincial governor Kouch Chamroeun, the writer said local authorities ignored illegal gambling activities, allowing it to operate freely. The media outlet’s license was removed by the Ministry of Information ^[2].

¹ <https://tinyurl.com/4krvm4pk>

² <https://tinyurl.com/87je2jrh>

- ❑ Four journalists from different media outlets were arrested and charged by Pursat provincial court with violation of privacy under Article 302 of Criminal Code and extortion for allegedly entering a restricted area. Publishers told CamboJA that the reporters were looking into a tip about suspicious gold mining activities. The journalists were released on bail on July 14 after they wrote an apology letter, acknowledging their wrongdoing. They have been placed under court supervision ^[3].
- ❑ A journalist from Mondulkiri province who recorded a video about illegal timber exports to Vietnam was questioned after a complaint was made by a police officer at Labakhe border checkpoint in Mondulkiri. He was asked to put his thumbprint on a document to “correct the information” in order to “end the dispute” ^[4].
- ❑ An online journalist said in a Facebook post that he received an anonymous death threat and called on Prime Minister Hun Manet to help. The journalist later removed the post and told CamboJA the issue had been addressed ^[5].
- ❑ Two freelance journalists whose press card expired received legal warning from a public official after they sought comment from the official. The official refused to talk with the journalists, saying their press cards expired and threatening to report them to authorities if they continued asking questions ^[6].
- ❑ An online journalist with San Prum News was summoned for questioning on September 9 by the General Commissariat of National Police when an individual lodged a complaint. That person was named in a video interview about a family’s land dispute. The journalist said a lawyer representing the individual also sent a letter on July 18 threatening legal action if the video was not take down. It was removed on August 2 ^[7].
- ❑ A TV reporter in Ratanakiri was unlawfully detained by private individual in Ratanakiri province for four hours after the journalist entered a plantation to cover a mining issue. The journalist reportedly went to the plantation and took some pictures and videos of people mining before being stopped by the guards and accused of entering the private location without permission ^[8].

³ <https://tinyurl.com/45jhsjxx>

⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/ectt7amb>

⁵ The case was verified by CamboJA but the affected journalist refused to provide detail, saying that the issue addressed as his post removed.

⁶ The case was verified and recorded as detail report by CamboJA but to ensure safety of affected journalists, CamboJA provided only the incident information.

⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/4pbrx6jz>

⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/2kuw4r59>

- A journalist in Banteay Meanchey province was physically harassed while doing a video report of a traffic accident. The journalist reported being pushed to the ground and having his smartphone snatched. The journalist later posted a video describing the harassment. He said a provincial police officer later called requesting that he remove the post, which he did ^[9].
- Three online media publishers were sued for incitement to discrimination after reporting that a building owned by a powerful individual in Oddar Meanchey province was being rented out by an illegal online gambling operation. Two of the publishers were ordered to appear in Phnom Penh Municipal Court on October 21 for questioning, while the other was ordered to appear at the court on October 8 but asked for delay ^[10].
- An environmental journalist in Stung Treng province was charged with incitement and clearing forest land. The journalist denied the allegations and said the legal action was due to his accurate reporting on environmental disputes involving a private company. This is not the first criminal case against the journalist. To date, he has five different legal cases, a majority of them the same charges. In September 2023, he was sentenced to five years in prison on charges of encroaching forest land. The case has reached the Supreme Court where his appeal will be heard. ^[11]

We caution against drawing any firm conclusions from these numbers, as we note that this is almost surely not a comprehensive accounting of harassment against journalists. Some cases are brushed under the rug, and some journalists are understandably afraid to complain publicly for fear of further reprisal.

⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/4x3rm655>

¹⁰ <https://tinyurl.com/2cndwxe2>

¹¹ <https://tinyurl.com/2ydpnj4c>

IV. This Quarter in Context

CamboJA breaks down harassment of journalists into four safety dimensions — physical, digital, legal safety, and restriction/intimidation. The majority of cases during the quarter from July-September were in the legal realm.

Type of harassment	# of cases	# of affected journalists
Physical harassment	3 cases recorded this quarter	3 journalists were affected <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ An online journalist posted on his Facebook, saying that he received an anonymous death threat. ❑ A TV journalist was unlawfully detained after entering a plantation in Ratanakiri to cover a mining story. ❑ A journalist in Banteay Meanchey was physically harassed while recording a video of a traffic accident.
Legal harassment	8 cases recorded this quarter	14 journalists were affected <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ One journalist in Kandal was charged with incitement to commit a felony and sentenced to one year in prison. ❑ One freelance journalist in Phnom Penh was arrested on charges of incitement and placed in pretrial detention in Kandal province ❑ Four journalists in Pursat have been charged with violation of privacy and extortion and placed under the court's supervision ❑ One journalist in Mondulakiri was summoned for questioning ❑ One journalist in Phnom Penh was sued and summoned for questioning ❑ Two journalists in Phnom Penh were warned over their press cards being expired ❑ Three journalists in Oddar Meanchey were sued by a private individual. ❑ One environmental journalist in Stung Treng was sued by authority
Digital harassment	No incident was recorded during the quarter	
Restriction/discrimination	No incident was recorded during the quarter	

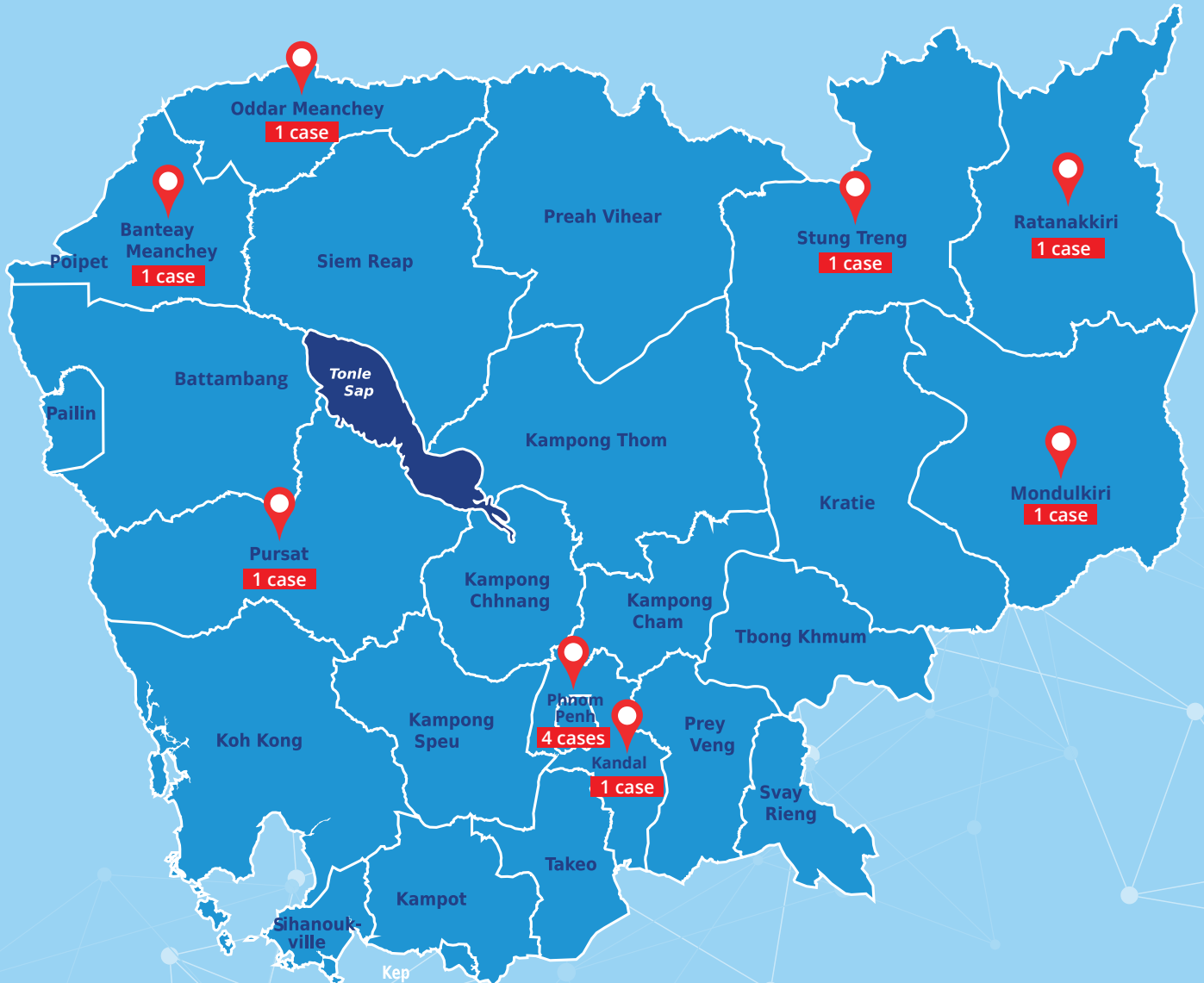
a. The actors involved

Most of the incidents recorded this quarter were carried out by state actors and private individuals, including police, national officials and local authorities. In many of these cases, journalists were charged with incitement and defamation related to reporting that impacted the image of authorities and other individuals.

Actors	# of cases	# of affected journalists
State actor	7 cases recorded related to state actors/authorities	<p>11 journalists were affected by legal action taken by state actors/authorities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ One journalist was sued by police and was charged with incitement to commit a felony while reporting about local authorities ignoring illegal online gambling. ❑ Four journalists were sued by authorities and charged with violation of privacy and extortion after entering a prohibited area. ❑ One journalist was sued by border police and summoned for questioning by district police. ❑ Two journalists were threatened with legal action due to their press cards being expired. ❑ One freelance journalist arrested and charged with incitement. ❑ An environmental journalist was sued by authorities. ❑ One journalist in Phnom Penh was sued and summoned for questioning.
Private Company/individual	4 cases recorded related to private company and individual	<p>6 journalists were affected by legal or physical harassment by a private individual or company</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ One TV journalist was unlawfully detained after entering a plantation to cover mining ❑ Three journalists were summoned for questioning based on a complaint from an individual. ❑ An online journalist received a death threat from an unknown person. ❑ A journalist was physically harassed while doing a video report of a traffic accident.

b. Incident locations

The most frequent location for incidents this quarter was Phnom Penh. Most of the cases observed in the northeast provinces were linked to reporting on environment issues.



Location: city/provinces	# of cases	# of affected journalists
Mondulkiri	1	1
Pursat	1	4
Kandal	1	1
Phnom Penh	4	5
Ratanakiri	1	1
Banteay Meanchey	1	1
Stung Treng	1	1
Uddor Meanchey	1	3
Total	11	17

c. Journalists detained/imprisoned

During the period from July to September, CamboJA was aware of two journalists who spent time in prison in relation to their work. It's possible other journalists served prison time during this period.

Name of victim	Institution	City/ province	Charged	Date of arresting
Mech Dara	Freelancer	Phnom Penh	Incitement to disturb social security, over social media posts	September 30, 2024 Placed in pre-trial detention at Kandal provincial prison. He was released on bail on October 24, 2024
Ry Rhythya	GG TV net	Kandal	Incitement to commit felony	July 6, 2024 Sentenced to one year in prison. Released after one month and fourteen days imprisoned, the remaining time suspended

V. Case Reports

Police: Mondulkiri journalist Killed in traffic accident

Background

Srorn Ravann, a reporter for online CPN news, was one of three online journalists in Mondulkiri who was arrested in October 2023 on charges of extorting a Chinese mining firm in Keo Seima district. He was placed pretrial detention for six months and released on bail in March 2024.

On June 14, 2024, he was found dead in a canal alongside a street in the province after going missing two weeks prior.

Provincial police said Rovanna drunkenly drove off the road, leading to his accidental death. However, his colleagues have raised questions about the case, and his relatives said police refused to give back his phone, which was eventually burned along with his body.

Days before death

On the morning of June 1, 33-year-old Ravann left his home in Mondulkiri province's Dakdam district to visit friends in Koh Nehk district.

One of his friends told CamboJA that Ravann arrived his home at around 10:30 am and stayed for lunch before leaving to see another friend in the district at about 4pm that same day.

"He asked me for a few chickens for making food, and he said he will come to take the chickens when returning from his friend," he said. "I was waiting for him to take the chickens, but he did not come."

The next day, the friend said he received a phone call from Ravann's wife, who told him that her husband did not return home. He said Ravann's wife repeatedly called him in the ensuing days, saying that her husband still had not returned home.

He then asked her to inform police about Ravann’s disappearance, but she dared not, out of fear that police would think her husband was trying to skip bail.

Ravann’s wife told CamboJA she had spoken with her husband around 8pm on that first night but told him not to try to drive home that night out of concern for his safety.

The next morning, on June 2, she said Ravann called her sister-in-law to say he’d be home later. When he wasn’t home by 1pm, she tried calling his friend in Koh Nhek district, where he had stayed overnight. The friend said Savann had left at 5:30am that morning.

Dead body found two weeks later

Not secure mekong-news.com/socialite/2024/06/14/1089/

ប្រពន្ធយំបោកខ្លួនពេលរកឃើញសពប្តី

មណ្ឌលគិរី: កម្មករកាត់ស្មៅបានប្រទះឃើញសាកសពមានសភាពស្នាយល្អនៅក្នុងប្រឡាយចិញ្ចើមផ្លូវជាតិលេខ៧៦ ចំណុចប៉ោមដុតសពក្នុងតំបន់ជុំវិញផ្លូវជាតិលេខ៧៦ ក្នុងសង្កាត់មេនាគ្រុងសែនមនោរម្យ កាលពីព្រឹកថ្ងៃទី១៤ ខែមិថុនា ឆ្នាំ២០២៣។

សាពសពបុរសដែលស្លាប់មានឈ្មោះស្រីន វ៉ារ៉ាន់ ជាភ្នាក់ងារសារព័ត៌មាន CPN News ប្រចាំខេត្តមណ្ឌលគិរី។

តាមសន្និដ្ឋានរបស់នគរបាលជំនាញ សាកសពស្លាប់ដោយសារជិះម៉ូតូធ្លាក់ផ្លូវ ដោយសារទីតាំងមានសភាពកោងខ្លាំង។

តាមសាច់ញាតិ បានឲ្យដឹងថា ជនរងគ្រោះ បានចេញពីផ្ទះនៅឃុំជាក់ដំ ស្រុកអូររាំង ដោយប្រាប់ប្រពន្ធថា ទៅយកព័ត៌មាននៅស្រុកកោះញែក តាំងពីថ្ងៃទី១ ខែមិថុនា មកម៉្លេះ ហើយបាត់ដំណឹងតែម្តងទើបរកឃើញនៅពេលនេះ។

Screenshot of a relative at the accident site where the victim, a journalist, was found dead on June 14, 2024

Savann's body was found almost two weeks later, in the morning of June 14, in a canal alongside National Road 76. The body was reported discovered by a worker cutting grass.

Authorities [claimed](#) that he died in a traffic accident on the curved road. A picture shared with CamboJA by group of journalists showed the body laying on the bank of canal, with his motorbike on top.

The body was burned at the crematorium nearby where the accident happened. The relatives said police did not give them the victim's phone and burned it with the body.

"When asked for the phone, the police claimed that the phone was dirty as it was with dead body for many days, so police burned the phone with body," the relative said.

Mondulkiri provincial Police Chief Lao Sokha said the investigation was conducted by provincial authorities including provincial health experts. He said authorities had thoroughly examine the case and concluded that the journalist died of traffic accident on his own.

Sokha said the victim fell into the canal, which is 1.5m deep, causing his neck to break. At the location, his body was hidden by high grass. Sokha claimed that after the investigation, the dead body was given to the family for a traditional ceremony.

A group of journalists shared their skepticism in a Telegram group chat that was shared with CamboJA. They also raised concern about their safety and advised each other to be careful when traveling.

"I still don't believe he... died like this as he knew the condition of the road well, he drove almost every day on that road," said one journalist.

"The road he returned from Koh Nheaek is going uphill, it could not cause death. But I can't say anything against police reports. It's impossible to go uphill and fall off the road and die like this, it's possible if he drives downhill."

Lao Sokha also confirmed the accident occurred while Ravann was driving uphill and said he was drunk.

VI. Key case updates and general media landscape:

Appeal Court upholds conviction against journalist

On August 15, the Appeal Court in Battambang upheld the conviction against journalist Ung Thap Reang on charges of public defamation and incitement to commit a felony under Article 305 and 495 of the Criminal Code.

The Banteay Meanchey Provincial Court sentenced Thap Reang on January 25 this year following complaints filed by the Poipet Referral Hospital and provincial tax department.

He had written an article accusing the entities of corrupt practices, which appeared in the online media outlet Khmer Cheayden.

The provincial court sentenced Thap Reang to six months' imprisonment, but the jail term was suspended. However, he was ordered to pay a two million riel fine (approximately \$500).

Thap Reang told CamboJA on August 16 that he was not present at the appeal hearing. He was represented by his lawyer, who was provided through local rights group Licadho. Thap Reang plans to file an appeal to the Supreme Court.

He maintains his innocence. "Actually, I did not commit any crime according to the charge. I worked based on my profession and ethics as a journalist," he said, adding that any alleged offense should be punished under the press law.

UN experts call for suspension of professional journalism charter

United Nations experts [called for the suspension](#) of Cambodia's newly issued Charter for Professional Journalism as it lacked comprehensive consultations and proper remedies for when the media makes factual errors.

"No comprehensive consultations were held as part of the process of developing the Charter and a few stakeholders were given only nine days to comment. Just four days after the deadline, the Charter was promulgated without the possibility of further discussion on the input by relevant parties," the experts said.

The experts are also concerned over the broad scope of the charter, which is intended to be applied to individual journalists, media outlets, publishers, journalists' associations, and those operating on social media platforms. Experts noted that any professional media code should be drafted by and for the media rather than through a Ministry-led process.

UN experts call on Cambodia to protect and promote independent, free and pluralist media as a vital pillar of democracy and an enabler of sustainable development and to reform laws, policies and practices, including the Charter, that impede freedom of expression.

The Charter for Professional Journalism officially launched on August 6, 2024, after the ministry made the Charter public on July 24, 2024.



Information Minister Neth Pheaktra speaks at a press conference to launch the Charter for Professional Journalism on August 6, 2024, a photo post on the Ministry of Information's Facebook.

[The Permanent Mission of Cambodia in Geneva](#) on September 17, issued a statement saying the request from UN experts showed contempt for the government's efforts to promote journalistic ethics and standards across all forms of media.

On August 6, the Ministry of Information officially launched the Charter of Professional Journalism, aiming to facilitate common standards and order in the field of journalism ^[12].

The 27-section charter was drafted by the ministry after it held the first consultative meeting on April 19 with journalists and stakeholders. The draft was released for feedback on July 24 in a half-day consultative workshop,^[13] while leaving only one week for additional input^[14].

Media organizations, journalists and other stakeholders have said the rushed implementation of the charter without meaningful input raise serious questions about its compatibility with international standards and best practices of professional journalism.

Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA) noted that some requests made by stakeholders were amended but others remained the same like the requested the deletion of a few phrases, and addition of some “important” phrases in the draft including Article 4, 5, 21 and 28.

CamboJA reveals “strategic, systematic operations” to attack exiled media

CamboJA News published an article^[15] revealing “strategic, systematic operations” that had been set up to attack exiled media outlets including VOD (Voice of Democracy) Khmer, Radio Free Asia (RFA) Khmer and The Cambodia Daily Khmer.

The social media accounts involved in the trolling campaign often showed images of people dressed in military uniforms, or had been created in the past year or two. Media experts suggested the well-organized effort may be intended to help the ruling party.

The targeted outlets regularly publish reports and commentary highly critical of Cambodia’s government.

One of the media outlet’s presidents said the critical comments began to show up when the outlet resumed operations abroad in October 2023.

Based on research^[16] conducted by a local digital security expert, most of the comments involve the use of computer programs that automatically generate comments, combined with comment created by humans copy-and-pasting.

Reporters Without Borders^[17] expressed its concern over the attacks and urged the Cambodian government to end the trolling campaign. But government officials claim there’s not order to carry out such activities, while saying every individual is entitled to freedom of expression.

¹³ <https://tinyurl.com/pcj5e8ds>

¹⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/83333bwu>

¹⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/yy39bjuj>

¹⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/ej8spmb3>

¹⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/yc4e4k2t>

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 and citizen journalists in relation to their journalistic work.
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 gendersensitive manner.
4. Immediately drop pending charges and review criminal sentences against journalists.
5. 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.
6. Enact a broadcasting law that establishes an independent broadcasting authority and clear and neutral rules for the allocating broadcasting licenses, in line with international standards.
7. Enact an access to information law that aligns with international standards by the end of 2024.
8. 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).
9. 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 the Cambodian constitution.

Report cases of harassments

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