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Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association



Journalism Situation in Cambodia

Quarterly Monitoring Report

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I. Introduction and Summary

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.

The most shocking incident in this quarter was the killing of Chhoeung Chheng, a journalist working with Kampuchea Aphiwat news website in Siem Reap province.

Chheng, 63, was shot in the abdomen by an assailant on December 4 as he was travelling through Chi Kraeng district.

This is the first killing of a journalist in Cambodia since 2014, when Taing Try was shot dead while reporting on illegal logging in Kratie province.

Also during this reporting period, two journalists were charged of black mail and placed in pretrial detention, after their outlet recently reported on illegal cockfighting rings.

There was also a major update in the case of Mech Dara, a well-known journalist who previously worked for VOD, The Phnom Penh Post and The Cambodia Daily. Dara was released on bail after an international outcry over his arrest for social media posts.

Overall this quarter, CamboJA recorded 13 cases of harassment affecting 21 journalists (two women journalists). That included 8 cases of legal action/intimidation and 2 cases of physical threats, including one journalist killed. We also recorded 2 cases of psychological threats.

That marked an uptick from last quarter, when we documented 11 cases of harassment affecting 17 journalists, including eight instances of legal threats.

The frequency of reports of legal intimidation against journalists continues a worrying trend, in which criminal charges like incitement, extortion and defamation brought against journalists covering sensitive stories, rather than using the civil process outlined in the Press Law.

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.

In December, Prime Minister Hun Manet issues a statement for the 21st Editors' Forum in which he said journalists should dare to speak the truth and offer constructive criticism. However, journalists who dare to report on powerful people in Cambodia are too often treated as criminals.

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 that reflects the constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and freedom of speech for 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 October to December 2024. We also provide updates on two journalists who were released on bail after spending time in prison.

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's 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.

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 October-December 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

Due to safety and security concerns, the names of affected journalists and other identifying information has been withheld from these summaries except in cases in which their names have already been publicly disclosed by media and courts.

December 15, 2024, Kandal province

Two online journalists from SSB TV News were arrested and charged with blackmail under Article 372 and 373 of Criminal Code by the Kandal provincial court. They were sent to pre-trial detention at Kandal provincial prison on December 17, 2024.

At first, police said the journalists were arrested for extortion and forgery. The police did not identify the complainant. However, a screenshot posted by the Police Commissariat of Kandal on December 16 showed a two-way conversation via Telegram between a journalist and a person, known as Veasna, who offered to give the journalist some money for gas.

A wife of one of the journalists denied that her husband extorted money, and that it was given voluntarily.

Another journalist, who asked not to be named, told CamboJA that prior to the arrest, SSB TV News published reports about an alleged illegal cockfighting operation in the Grand Dragon Resort on December 13 and 14, which were later deleted¹.

December 11, 2024, Phnom Penh city

A freelance journalist reported being questioned by an unnamed individual about a documentary film produced by a foreign-based outlet on environmental issues.

The journalist was asked by the man during a phone call if he had brought the media team for filming the documentary. The journalist was also asked about the location of the dam featured in the film, and whether the film used footage from other countries. The journalist regarded this as a form of intimidation against journalists and called on civil society to continue to monitor this form of intimidation.

December 5, 2024, Phnom Penh city

A videographer and a female citizen journalist were banned from interviewing and filming 100 citizens who gathered in front of the Phnom Penh City Hall to demand Governor Khoung Sreng expedite the issuance of land title.

According to the video journalist, an official from the city hall stopped the residents from talking to them while he was filming interviews.

¹ <https://pfmsea.org/two-journalists-kandal-charged-blackmail>

The official claimed that the journalists were working for political purposes. In the video shared with CamboJA, the official was seen shouting and pointing at the video journalist to turn off his camera². The journalist said the official shouted at him twice, which scared them into turning the camera off.

December 4, 2024, Siem Reap province

Chhoeung Chheng, a Siem Reap-based journalist with online media outlet Kampuchea Aphivath, was shot. He died three days from the attack.

The 63-year-old was shot in the abdomen by an assailant on December 4 as he was travelling in Chi Kraeng district to report in a forest conservation area. According to a journalist who witnessed the incident, Chheng was about 40 meters ahead of him when he was shot, resulting in critical injuries and his death on the night of December 7.

Authorities said they arrested a suspect in the case who confessed to the shooting of Chheng over a “personal conflict.”³ However, the suspect, Si Luery, 40, was reportedly accused of illegal logging in some of Chheng’s previous reporting.

A journalist who visited Chheng at the hospital told CamboJA that he and a colleague were investigating suspicions of illegal logging in a community forest. On their way out of the forest, he said they ran into the suspect and talked for a while before the shot was fired.

December 3, 2024, Phnom Penh city

A female journalist who often joins online talk shows discussion press freedom in Cambodia reported that she has been put under surveillance.

According to the journalist, a person living next to her parents’ home in Preah Vihear province, known as Kosal, who was previously a district council member, showed her parents a screenshot of her during an online live show. The person told her parents that the picture was sent by a person who asked for her home address on December 2.

According to the journalist, Kosal quoted the person as saying, “Do you know a female journalist who lives at Por Breme? And where is her home?” when he spoke to the journalist’s parents. The journalist said she received this information from her parents on December 3.

On November 28, the journalist joined an online talk show conducted by a local rights group to discuss “Freedom of expression and freedom of the press”⁴.

² <https://pfmsea.org/videographer-female-citizen-journalist-banned-interviewing-protestors>

³ <https://www.camboja.net/advocacy/joint-statements/joint-statement-ensure-swift-justice-for-journalist-murdered-in-siem-reap/>

⁴ <https://pfmsea.org/female-journalist-believed-be-under-surveillance-authority>

December 2, 2024, Batambang province

A publisher at Banan Santepheap News was summoned by Battambang provincial court based on the complaint made by Banan district governor Sreng Sokha for public defamation after he reported on social and environmental issues.

Five court summonses were issued on December 2, by prosecutor Duong Saron, who ordered the journalist to appear in court for questioning on December 18, related to five Facebook posts and reports between October and November. The journalist said he was questioned by the court about the information he published in that period.

Of the posts reviewed by CamboJA, four were posted on his personal account, accusing the local authorities of corrupt practices in managing state properties, while one was a live video report about a Water Festival rowing team urging authorities to be transparent about the donations raised through charity⁵.

November 28, 2024, Kampong Cham province

The publisher of KH Plus News was summoned by the Kampong Cham provincial court over accusations of defaming the judiciary after the initial apology he made was not accepted.

In the summons issued on November 28 and shared on December 2, prosecutor Toch Oudom ordered the publisher to appear in court on December 19.

According to the summons, the publisher allegedly insulted the judicial institution continuously, shared false information which discredited the court, and criticized judicial decisions on land disputes.

KH Plus News made live videos of land disputes between two families in Kampong Siem district on November 20 and 21, 2024, according to court records. In the videos, the publisher allegedly used an inappropriate word, and criticized the local authority and provincial court for not addressing the dispute appropriately and fairly⁶.

The case was dropped after the publisher issued an apology following mediation from the Justice Ministry.

November 27, 2024, Mondulkiri province

Mondulkiri provincial court prosecutor Hak Sieklim ordered the publisher at MD TV News in Mondulkiri to appear in court on December 26 for questioning regarding a lawsuit filed by Yu Chanty, who allegedly filled up a public canal illegally.

The case centers on two reports published on June 18 and 19.

⁵ <https://pfmsea.org/battambang-journalist-faces-five-defamation-lawsuits>

⁶ <https://pfmsea.org/journalist-summoned-court-public-defamation>

According to the publisher, his report was based on information given by villagers living nearby the canal as well as field reports. He said on June 20, the Sen Monorom town administration acknowledged that the canal had been filled by Chanty, who is a former Koh Nhek district councilor, and ordered him to clear the sand from the canal.

The publisher said he later received a statement from the Sen Monorom administration ordering his outlet to make a correction within 72 hours. The authority said the report was incomprehensive and based on “incitement” from another individual⁷.

November 23, 2024, Stung Treng province

A freelance environmental journalist was arrested and detained for questioning for two days by Stung Treng provincial authorities for entering an area, said to be prohibited, where illegal logging was allegedly happening.

The journalist, who worked for outlets including Mongabay, was arrested with five other environmental activists who entered the site, believed to be operated by T.S.M.W Co Ltd in the Veun Sai-Siem Pang National Park in Stung Treng. They were arrested by soldiers who were camping in the National Park area and sent to the provincial gendarmerie headquarters for questioning.

During questioning, military police threatened the journalist with charges under Article 494 of the Criminal Code for entering a prohibited area and collecting information to “sell to foreign countries.”

The journalist said his equipment, including drones, smartphones, trackers and chargers were seized by the authorities for further investigation.

He added that a person who came with the prosecutor and claimed to be a lawyer asked him and other activists to pay \$1,000 each (\$6,000 total) in exchange for their release on bail. However, after negotiation, he agreed to lower the cost to \$1,000 total⁸.

The journalist said they paid the \$1,000 and were not charged, but added the equipment has not been returned.

November 21, 2024, Siem Reap province

A journalist from Moha Khmer News said he was physically assaulted by a provincial military police, while a Siem Reap Post journalist had his phone damaged when they were filming a live report at the National Museum in Siem Reap.

⁷ <https://pfmsea.org/journalist-mondulkiri-sued-illegal-canal-filling-report>

⁸ <https://pfmsea.org/freelance-journalist-detained-after-entering-prohibited-area>

One of the journalists said the incident happened around 11 pm in Svay Dangkum commune as he was reporting live about security at the museum, where authorities were questioning a person who was suspected of attempting to enter the museum at night.

The Siem Reap Post journalist said while he was filming the man who was being questioned, he was asked to stop filming by a military police officer.

The journalist said the officer approached him, asked for his press card and yelled at him and tried to grab his smartphone. He said at the time, the journalist from Moha Khmer News tried to help him but was instead punched by the officer, who then managed to snatch his smartphone, throwing it down and causing it to be damaged.

The next day, the journalists and the officer were asked to settle their case to end the dispute, which was mediated by the provincial military police.

The journalist whose smartphone was damaged received unspecified compensation, and the officer apologised to the other journalist for his actions⁹.

November 17, 2024, Kandal province

Five online journalists from different media outlets were questioned by Kandal provincial police officers after reporting about an alleged illegal gambling operation in the province.

VOD News reported on November 19 that the five journalists were arrested and detained for a day for questioning.

The Police Commissariat of Kandal Province denied the journalists were arrested and detained, claiming they were only asked to give details relating to the report and were then allowed to return home after questioning.

According to a source quoted by VOD, the five journalists were detained one night for questioning and asked to sign a contract before their release.

The journalists also appeared in a video on TSP68 TV saying that they were not arrested and detained as reported by VOD¹⁰.

November 5, 2024, Kep province

An online journalist from ICDTV media outlet in Kep province was questioned by Kep provincial court following a complaint filed by Sao Saroeun, who is said to be a military officer.

⁹ <https://pfmsea.org/two-siem-reap-journalists-physically-assaulted-military-police>

¹⁰ <https://pfmsea.org/five-journalists-questioned-reporting-gambling-operation>

The journalist was sued for violation of privacy after his media outlet published reports on August 10 and 22 that Saroeun was allegedly involved in clearing and encroaching land on a state-owned mountain.

The journalist said the report was based on information from villagers and documents issued by Damnak Chang'aeur district authority.

A letter sent to Sao Saroeun by Damnak Chang'aeur district administration on September 10, 2024, informed him of his illegal occupation of a land measuring over 89,000 square meters where he built a concrete road, toilet and other infrastructure. The administration asked Saroeun to halt further construction and land clearing.

Saroeun also lodged a complaint with the Ministry of Information before he filed a lawsuit¹¹.

On September 20, the ministry summoned the journalist for a discussion about ethics and urged him to abide by the Charter of Professional Journalism. On October 26, the ministry issued a warning letter, ordering the media outlet to remove the articles, images, and videos related to Sao Saroeun.

The publisher of ICDTV said they removed the two reports and apologized to Sao Saroeun. However, the outlet republished the August 22 report after Saroeun filed a suit against the journalist in court.

October 24, 2024, Takeo province

Two journalists from Sunday TV Online and Koh Santepheap Daily received a complaint from a person known as Sot Vuth, who was accused in their reports of being involved in corrupt practices related to paddy rice transportation at the Vietnam border in Takeo province.

In the complaint dated October 22, seen by CamboJA, Sot Vuth, who claimed to be the son of Hun Bunthoeun, a sister of Senate President Hun Sen, requested the Ministry of Information take legal action against the individuals and publications, and revoke their media licenses.

Sot Vuth accused both outlets of publishing false information that harmed his honor and dignity, and demanded compensation of \$200,000 from the individuals.

Tep Asnarith, spokesperson of the Ministry of Information, requested that CamboJA submit an official letter to obtain information.

¹¹ <https://pfmsea.org/journalist-sued-report-powerful-individual-involved-state-land-encroachment>

IV. This Quarter in Context

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

Type of harassment	# of cases	# of affected journalists
Physical harassment	2 cases recorded this quarter	<p>3 journalists were affected, two were physically assaulted and one was killed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two journalists in Siem Reap were physically assaulted by provincial military police when they were filming a live report at the National Museum in Siem Reap. Chhoeung Chheng, a Siem Reap-based journalist with online media Kampuchea Aphivath, was shot on December 4, and died three days later.
Legal harassment	8 cases recorded this quarter	<p>14 journalists were affected</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two online journalists from SSB TV News were arrested and charged with blackmail. They were sent to pre-trial detention at Kandal provincial prison on December 17, 2024. A publisher at Banan Santepheap News was summoned by Battambang provincial court after he reported on social and environmental issues. The publisher of KH Plus News was summoned by the Kampong Cham provincial court in relation to public defamation of the judicial institution. Mondulkiri provincial court prosecutor summoned the publisher of MD TV News for questioning over a lawsuit related to reporting on alleged illegal activity in a public canal. A freelance environmental journalist was arrested and detained for questioning for two days by Stung Treng provincial authorities for entering an area they said was prohibited. Five online journalists from different media outlets were questioned by Kandal provincial police after reporting about an alleged illegal gambling operation. An journalist from the ICDTV online media outlet in Kep province was questioned by the provincial court following a complaint made by Sao Saroeun, who is said to be a military officer. Two journalists from Sunday TV Online and Koh Santepheap Daily were the subject of complaint to the Ministry of Information by a person known as Sot Vuth, demanding compensation of \$200,000 from the individuals.
Digital harassment	No incident was recorded during the quarter	
Restriction/others	3 incidents were recorded during the quarter	<p>4 journalists were affected</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A female journalist reported apparent surveillance. The journalist was asked by a person for her home address after appearing in an online forum on press freedom. A freelance journalist was questioned by an unnamed individual about the documentary film produced by a foreign-based media company about environmental issues. A videographer and a female citizen journalist were banned from interviewing and filming 100 citizens who gathered in front of the Phnom Penh City Hall.

a. The actors involved

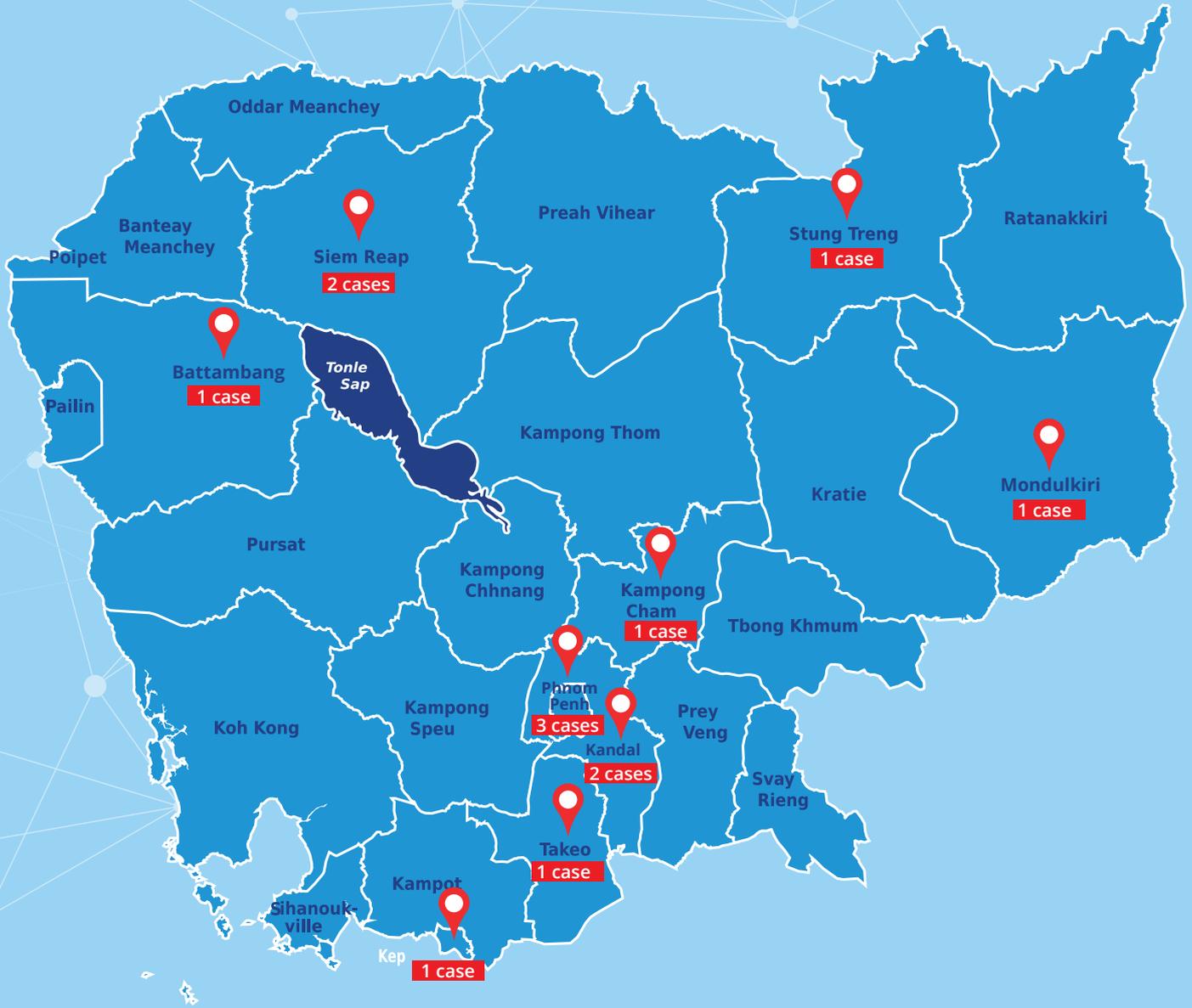
Most of the incidents recorded this quarter were carried out by state actors and private individuals, including police, national officials and local authorities. In many of these cases, journalists were charged with incitement and defamation related to reporting that impacted the image of authorities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

Actors	# of cases	# of affected journalists
State actor /public institutions	7 cases recorded related to state actors/public institutions	13 journalists were affected by legal action taken by local authorities, police/public institutions. In these incidents, the journalists were summoned, sued, arrested, charged and imprisoned, while two journalists were physically assaulted. Most of the reports were about environmental abuses or other issues that impact the image of authorities.
Private Company/ individual	6 cases recorded related to private company and individual	8 journalists were subject to legal or physical harassment by a private individual or company. One journalist in Siem Reap was killed while investigating illegal logging, while another was sued in a case linked to environmental issues.

b. Incident locations

Location: city/provinces	# of cases	# of affected journalists
Phnom Penh	3	4
Kandal	2	7
Siem Reap	2	3
Kampong Cham	1	1
Battambang	1	1
Kep	1	1
Stung Treng	1	1
Mondulkiri	1	1
Takeo	1	2
	13	21

The most frequent location for incidents this quarter was Phnom Penh, Kandal and Siem Reap. Most of the cases observed were linked to reporting on environmental issues.



V. Key Case Updates and General Media Landscape:

Cambodia's media pushes for independent oversight council

Cambodian journalism associations are calling for an independent press council—similar to those in other ASEAN countries—to strengthen ethical standards and improve safety for journalists.

During an October 31 conference titled “Trust in Cambodian News”, UNESCO organized a panel with Cambodian journalists and media houses to mark the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists and discuss challenges facing the country's press corps.

Speaking to the panel, Chhan Sokunthea, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM), emphasized the need for an independent press council to create a self-regulating media industry and curb state court overreach.

UNESCO country representative Sardar Umar Alam said the role of an independent council is to provide legal safeguards, promote journalist safety, and champion freedom of expression, ensuring a thriving independent media that maintains editorial independence and financial sustainability.

The chairman of Timor Leste's independent press council, Otelio Ote, spoke about the constitutional guarantees for public access to news and information in Timor Leste and other ASEAN nations, and shared the model of independent press council in Timor Leste¹².

Information ministry says Press Law amendment coming soon

Information minister Neth Pheaktra on December 19, 2024, said that the ministry will organize a consultation [workshop on amending the Press Law](#), which is nearly 30 years old, dating back to 1995.

Speaking at the Second Media Development Conference, Pheaktra said the workshop will aim to make the law respond to new developments in society and technological systems and to comply with national and international laws. According to the minister,

¹² <https://cambojanews.com/cambodiasmediapushesfor-independent-oversight/>

UNESCO has already provided some input on the law on the media regime, which he said he can use as a basis to establish important points between national and international laws.

In August, the Ministry of Information launched a “Charter for Professional Journalism” that has been criticized by experts, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Cambodia, in part because it “lacked comprehensive consultation,” with only a few stakeholders given nine days to provide comments on it.

Prime Minister Hun Manet provides recommendations on journalism

In a statement issued on December 10, 2024, ahead of the 21st Editors’ Forum on December 21, Hun Manet said the achievements of the government are due to the active participation of media institutions and journalists. He asserted the Royal Government will pay attention to upholding the right to freedom of the press and freedom of expression in accordance with the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Press Law.

He continued that the Cambodian government needs a powerful, responsible, and professional press and journalists who dare to speak the truth and criticize constructively to reflect the full reality of society and avoid spreading one-sided or fake news.

However, he also mentioned that the use of these rights to express opinions beyond the legal limits still occurs, which has caused harm to social order and negatively affected citizens.

He added that the right of expression, freedom of the press, and publication are fully guaranteed in accordance with Cambodian laws and regulations. Therefore, journalists must not use those rights to harm the dignity of others and to harm social customs, public order, and national security.

Here are the eight recommendations given by Prime Minister Hun Manet to the editors to continue their efforts by:

- 1.** Collaborating with stakeholders to solve the violation of professional ethics and distorted information.
- 2.** Join in maintaining peace and eliminating opportunists hiding under the banner of journalism.
- 3.** Provide factual news and deliver news from both sides, including the government and citizens.

4. Act as a mirror reflecting the reality and inaction in society so that the government can have a basis for addressing problems in a targeted and effective manner.
5. Disseminate Cambodian laws and regulations related to the right to expression and freedom of the press more widely.
6. Promote public education on measures to prevent traffic accidents, drug use, human trafficking, and safe village and commune policies.
7. Adhere to professional ethics in broadcasting news based on balance and comprehensiveness, avoiding broadcasting that harms national interests and loses public trust.
8. Train journalists in both technical and professional skills to improve the quality of information, information security, and the prestige of media institutions.

Media told to be respectful when reporting gender-based issues

The Ministry of Women’s Affairs, in collaboration with the Ministry of Information and UNESCO, organized an annual press forum on gender equality, highlighting the role of the press in promoting gender equality and preventing violence against women. In line with that, gender experts called on the media to adhere to professional codes when reporting on women and vulnerable people.

The forum on the morning of December 5, 2024, was organized with the aim of mobilizing key stakeholders to promote gender equality and address gender-based violence issues in the media.

The call was made to ensure news coverage that promotes gender equality, the Code of Conduct for the Media Sector to ensure that journalists disseminate accurate information that does not tarnish society but is beneficial. The expert also said there is “no excuse” to violence against women and the integrated solutions require joint efforts. When used unethically, with misinformation and disinformation, media can reinforce harmful stereotypes and increase gender-based violence, discrimination and inequality.

Global data shows that around 736 million women – almost one in three of them – experience violence in their lifetime. In Cambodia, one UNESCO report on women’s presence in the news found that only 7% of the monitored news covered gender equality topics and 1% on gender-based violence¹³.

¹³ <https://cambojanews.com/media-told-to-be-respectful-when-reporting-gender-based-issues/>

Digital advertising saw growth in 2024

Minister of Information Neth Pheaktra said [digital advertising](#) saw growth of over 200 percent in 2024 with a total \$170 million, even though the number of media outlets has decreased from over 2,000 to just over 1,000, largely due to financial challenges.

Speaking at the Second Media Development Conference on December 19, 2024, Pheaktra noted that in 2016, \$116 million was spent on advertising through traditional media, such as radio, television, newspapers, and magazines, but the number has dropped to just \$80 million in 2024.

The minister warned the media outlets that fail to integrate into digital frameworks face closure, as the traditional platforms are being replaced by digital ones. He noted some media outlets that successfully adapted have merged traditional and modern platforms, which allows them to remain viable.

The minister said the ministry has supported the media by offering 50 percent discounts on licensing fees, as well as tax exemptions for small enterprises for five years, and providing legal and health support.

Information Ministry Undersecretary of State Sles Alfin pointed out that rural populations still rely on traditional media, making its decline a concern as it affects public access to information.

The ministry released the following figures as of 2024:

1. The ministry issued 1,620 licensed media entities, including television, radio, newspapers, magazines, websites, and online platforms, with 875 being online TV outlets.
2. Over 10,000 journalists in the country, with more than 8,000 holding ministry-issued identification cards.
3. In 2024, the Ministry of Information recorded 3,651 instances of fake news being published.

The ministry figures as of 2023:

1. In 2023, the ministry issued 3,201 press cards, including for 269 for women and 113 for international journalists.
2. more than 2,000 traditional and new media registered with the Ministry of Information, including 933 websites and online TV outlets.
3. In 2023, the ministry recorded more than 3,500 fake news published

Fears over journalists' rights being impacted by new guidelines

New Ministry of Interior guidelines that aim to strengthen ethical standards and privacy protections in disseminating social security information have raised concerns among media and human rights advocates for potentially restricting press freedom and public access to timely information.

The Ministry of Interior has issued a new set of guidelines that restrict officials from giving interviews to journalists, along with other measures that media experts fear will impact press freedom in Cambodia.

Stakeholders fear that the new instructions will restrict journalists' ability to receive timely information for the public, as well as hamper the rights of journalists to interview sources.

On December 27, the Ministry of Interior issued 'Instructions on Dissemination of Social Security Information for Competent Officials within the Ministry of Interior' that aims to strengthen the ethics of providing and advertising information related to investigative procedures and the rights of individuals.

The instructions feature 11 points related to authorities providing journalists with information, as well as the use of images and videos of victims, suspects and related stakeholders in court cases.

Source: <https://kiripost.com/stories/fears-over-journalists-rights-being-impacted-by-new-guidelines>

Journalist Soeu Sochea released on suspended sentence

An online journalist who reported on environmental and deforestation issues in Kampong Thom province was sentenced on November 7 to one year in prison for “incitement to discrimination” under Article 496 of the Criminal Code.

However, as he had already served five months and 15 days since his detention, the rest of the sentence was suspended and he was released on November 8. But he will be placed under supervision for three years, according to the court decision viewed by CamboJA.

Sochea was arrested on May 24, 2024, and detained two days later following a lawsuit filed against him by the provincial Environmental Department on May 20 for incitement and defamation. He allegedly produced a live video criticizing the environmental department director and other officials for their alleged involvement in deforestation activities in the province.

This is not Sochea’s first court case. Last year, he was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment on charges of extortion after reporting an illegal logging, but was released on bail.

In the November 6 trial, Sochea’s lawyer, who was provided by rights group Adhoc, said his client apologized to the prime minister and Senate president in writing and video, which were submitted to the court¹⁴.

¹⁴ <https://www.camboja.net/advocacy/articles/journalist-soeu-sochea-sentenced-to-one-year-in-prison-for-incitement/>

Journalist Mech Dara released on bail after apologizing

Freelance journalist Mech Dara was released on bail on October 24, 2024 after apologizing to Senate President Hun Sen and Prime Minister Hun Manet.

In the minute-long video published by Fresh News at 8:39 pm on October 23, Dara said, *"I would like to apologize to both leaders, Samdech Techo Hun Sen and Samdech Moha Borvor Thipadei Hun Manet for my social media posts made on September 20, 23, 26, 28, and 29 showing photos of a local tourist attraction, Ba Phnom, which was destroyed."*

Mech Dara, who is known for his extensive reports on human trafficking and cyber scam compounds in Cambodia, was arrested on September 30, 2024, and placed in pre-trial detention at Kandal provincial prison on charges of incitement to disturb social security over social media posts.

Prior to Dara's arrest, Prey Veng officials issued a statement on Facebook accusing Dara of wanting to "cause social disorder or confusion" after he posted a photo of quarry activities at Ba Phnom in Prey Veng province. The provincial administration also called on the Ministry of Information to take legal action against Dara¹⁵.

¹⁵ <https://www.camboja.net/advocacy/articles/journalist-mech-dara-released-on-bail-after-apologizing-to-the-leadership/>

VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the limitations of this report, the combined cases offer a worrying window into the state of journalism in Cambodia today. CamboJA's monitoring highlights the continued harassment through legal intimidation, physical threats, and detention.

Still, journalists continue to tell the stories about abuse of power, corruption, official misbehavior, and injustice — despite the personal and professional risks of doing so.

The dangers were underlined this quarter with the killing of journalist Chhoeung Chheng, marking the first journalist murder in Cambodia since 2014. Legal intimidation remains the most common form of repression, with an alarming increase in recent years of criminal charges such as incitement, extortion, and defamation targeting journalists.

Despite government claims that it wants to professionalize the sector and promote free expression, the persistent targeting of journalists reporting on sensitive issues undermines press freedom. CamboJA remains committed to documenting these incidents and advocating for an environment where journalists can operate safely and uphold the constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression.

We also observed a new development that the journalists, especially freelance journalists, are struggling to obtain the press card from the Ministry of Information, while some authorities refuse to talk to journalists if they have an expired press card.

Prime Minister Hun Manet said the achievements of the government are due to the active participation of media institutions and journalists. But much of the government's media reform efforts appear focused on enforcing vague ethical standards, rather than upholding protections for sensitive speech.

Journalists should be protected to report the truth to the best of their ability, and let the public decide who to trust. In cases where journalists overstep, the Press Law lays out appropriate avenues for legal recourse.

CamboJA remains committed to unbiased reporting and fostering a media landscape where journalists can work freely and safely. The organization urges stakeholders to support press freedom and address the challenges threatening independent journalism in Cambodia.

This ongoing report has served as an urgent reminder of the threats facing journalists, and the need for laws, policies and actions that ensure their protection. But that won't change without political will, which requires public participation.

It is CamboJA's hope that journalists will soon be able to freely work in Cambodia without fear of reprisal.

Recommendations

We continue to call on the government and relevant authorities to 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. More specifically, we urge the authorities and private individuals to:

1. Refrain from bringing criminal charges against journalists and citizen journalists in relation to their journalistic work, citizen journalists, human rights defenders, and social media users.
2. End impunity by promptly investigating, prosecuting and redressing cases of violence against journalists and human rights defenders.
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 and human rights defenders and investigate cases of violence against these groups.
5. 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 in 2025.
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.

11. Repeal the Inter-ministerial Prakas No. 170 used to revoke media licenses without court decision as well as grant the government power to order ISPs to block sites, and the sub-decrees on domain name registration, mandatory SIM card registration and the national internet gateway.
12. Place clear limits on the power of authorities to engage in surveillance and to block Internet sites without a court order and revise the Telecommunications Law to align with international standards.
13. Hold meaningful consultations on draft laws which impact freedom of expression to allow civil society to provide inputs and to ensure alignment with the ICCPR, including the draft laws related to cybercrime, cybersecurity, and personal data protection.
14. Increase internet access to its citizens to ensure all Cambodians can receive news online. This could be done by:
 - Ensuring equal access by marginalised groups of people, including women, people with disabilities, and ethnolinguistic minorities.
 - Incentivising the telecommunications sector to provide low-cost options in both urban and rural areas through tax breaks, subsidies, or similar schemes.
 - Expanding mobile services in rural areas, accompanied by credits or subsidies to citizens who are unable to afford personal internet use or devices.
 - Setting up community internet centres as places where the internet and computers are free for community members to use or come at a low cost.
15. Increase digital literacy education both in formal education settings such as schools and universities as well as in informal education settings. The aim is for Cambodians to be able to discern good sources of information from the bad as well as to be able to evaluate the news they receive.

New recommendations observed during the period of report:

16. Establish a meaningful consultation process with media and other stakeholders to ensure the press law amendment is aligned with international human rights standards.
17. Call on the Ministry of Information to ensure journalists can receive press cards in a timely and transparent manner and without any discrimination.

Report cases of harassments

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