

Joint Statement:

Release and drop charge against Journalists Phorn Sopheap and Pheap Pheara

Phnom Penh, 27 March 2026 — We, the undersigned local and international media organizations and civil society organizations working to promote press freedom and freedom of expression, are gravely dismayed by the unacceptable conviction and sentencing of two journalists, Phorn Sopheap and Pheap Pheara, to 14 years in prison. We call on the Cambodian government to withdraw the complaint and for the court to release the journalists so they may reunite with their families.

On 26 March 2026, the Court of Appeal in Battambang Province upheld the Siem Reap Provincial Court's decision to sentence Sopheap and Pheara to 14 years in prison on charges of supplying a foreign state with information prejudicial to national defence.

During the appeal hearing on 13 March 2026, the two journalists requested that the court drop the charges against them, stating that they had no intention of providing information to a foreign state. They explained that prior to entering an area near the frontlines during a trip to the border area that preceded their arrests, they had obtained permission. They denied installing any GPS tracking device on their smartphones and said that their social media posts aimed to inform the public that Cambodian soldiers remained steadfast. They also stated that neither of them intended to supply information to a foreign state, nor had they received any payment from Thailand.

Their lawyer requested that the court reclassify the charge from Article 445 (supplying a foreign state with information prejudicial to national defence) to Article 479 (intentional or unintentional disclosure of national defence secrets), which carries a lesser penalty. However, on 26 March 2026, the Court of Appeal denied the request and upheld the original decision.

On 29 July 2025, the two journalists traveled to a border area to provide humanitarian aid and report on local conditions. The government alleged that they shared a photograph taken at Ta Krabei Temple, which was later widely circulated by Thai media outlets noting the alleged presence of unplaced landmines in the background.

On 10 September 2025, the Siem Reap Provincial Court stated that the two journalists had been arrested on suspicion of gathering information and taking photographs in a restricted military zone near a battlefield, actions the court claimed could undermine national defense.

The use of broadly defined national security charges in this context raises concerns about the impact on freedom of expression and contributes to a chilling effect on media freedom. It also raises questions about the proportionality of the sentence and its consistency with international human rights standards, including the right to freedom of expression.

The severity of the sentences is likely to further deter journalists from carrying out their legitimate work in the public interest. Currently, at least four journalists have been charged and detained in connection with their reporting, including two who were arrested in February 2026. Of these, three are based in Banteay Meanchey and one in Oddar Meanchey. We call on the Cambodian government to drop the charges against all imprisoned journalists and to ensure that the freedom of the press and freedom of expression are fully protected in the country.

Endorsed by:

1. Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA)
2. Communication and Media Promotion Organization (CMPO)
3. Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM)
4. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense for Human Rights (LICADHO)
5. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
6. Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
7. Cambodian Institution for Democracy (CID)
8. Overseas Press Club of Cambodia (OPCC)
9. National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP), Philippines
10. Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI), Indonesia
11. Association Journalists Timor-Leste (AJTL), Timor-Leste
12. Prachatai, Thailand
13. Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), Malaysia
14. Gerakan Media Merdeka (Geramm), Malaysia
15. International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)
16. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)