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**LICADHO**

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## Going Offline? The Threat to Cambodia's Newfound Internet Freedoms Media Statement

**Phnom Penh, May 17, 2015-** On World Information Society Day, LICADHO releases its report “Going Offline? The Threat to Cambodia's Newfound Internet Freedoms,” describing the vital importance of the Internet for freedom of expression in Cambodia and the imminent threat that this last bastion for independent voices now faces.

Since coming to power, the ruling Cambodia People's Party (CPP) has controlled and censored traditional media outlets. Government controlled broadcast licenses have systematically been denied to independent broadcasters while journalists have been threatened, prosecuted, jailed, and in some cases murdered for crossing invisible lines of what can and cannot be publicly discussed.

Cambodia is now experiencing a boom in web connectivity driven by the increasing availability of cheap web-enabled smartphones and extensive mobile networks. As a result, citizens have been empowered by the ability of bloggers, monks, community activists, and opposition politicians to circumvent government media controls and disseminate information about important issues such as land-grabs, police violence, impunity, corruption, and deforestation, to name but a few.

However, this newfound space for free expression is under attack. The government has created Cyber War Team (CWT) to monitor and collect information from Facebook and other websites in order to “protect the government's stance and prestige.” The government has visited the headquarters of Cambodian telecoms firms and ISPs to examine their network equipment and will reportedly begin installing surveillance equipment. Such reports are especially troubling given recent vaguely worded telecommunications deals between Cambodia and China, a country that appears ambivalent at best with respect to internet freedom.

“Freedom of expression is a right that many Cambodians have never truly experienced,” said Am Sam Ath, Technical Coordinator for LICADHO. “It comes as no surprise that as soon as Cambodians found a way to have their voices heard, the government has begun a comprehensive effort to once again silence them.”

In addition, there are two draft laws that, if passed, would allow the Cambodia government to control the content of what Cambodians post online in addition to the very architecture of the Internet itself.

The draft Cybercrime Law would create a new National Anti-Cybercrime Committee (NACC), chaired by the Prime Minister, with expansive powers to search and seize communication equipment. The law would also authorize the government with broad discretion to arrest online users for creating or sharing content that is deemed to violate numerous vaguely worded provisions.

The draft Law on Telecommunications if enacted would extend the government's authority over not only content posted on the internet but also over the internet services providers. The law will authorize the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications with the power to order any telecoms

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operator to transfer control of its system to the ministry in order to “maintain national interest, security, stability, or public order.” Further provisions would outlaw the installation of telecoms equipment that might “affect public order or national safety and security.” The vague clauses could potentially encompass any telephone call or email that is viewed as hostile by the government.

“The draft Cybercrime Law and Law on Telecommunications are a clear attempt by the CPP to establish complete control over Cambodia’s Internet,” said LICADHO Director, Naly Pilorge. “The extreme discretion that Cambodian government would wield under these laws could and likely will be used to suppress virtually any form of critical online content.”

LICADHO urges the National Assembly to reject any legislation that seeks to impose severe restriction on fundamental rights to freedom of expression.

LICADHO also calls upon international donors and the international community at large to recognize and acknowledge that a vital space for freedom of expression in Cambodia is under serious threat, and this space needs to be promoted and protected in better ways.

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