



CCHR PRESS STATEMENT

On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights releases a video on press freedom in Cambodia, and calls for the creation of an environment that protects independent media and the rights of journalists

Phnom Penh, 3 May 2020 – Today, to mark World Press Freedom Day (“WPF”) 2020, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (“CCHR”) releases a short video showcasing the opinions of five journalists and media workers on the situation of press freedom and the importance of an independent media in Cambodia. The video can be viewed [here](#). On this day we call for the cultivation of an environment in which press freedom is adequately protected and the independent media and journalists can perform their important role freely, without harassment or fear of retaliation.

The crackdown on press freedom was ignited in 2017 with the mass shutdown of media outlets, but the campaign against free media and journalists has continued, and the chilling effects of the silencing of free media continue to be felt in Cambodia. In the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, Cambodia continued to drop, ranking at 144 out of 180 countries assessed. Nevertheless, over the past year the Royal Government of Cambodia (“RGC”) has taken some positive steps towards press freedom, including, granting a yearly license to the *Voice of America’s* bureau in Cambodia, allowing it to buy airtime from local radio stations to broadcast its daily news programs, however, this remains under negotiation, the Information Minister engaging in a meeting with representatives of Radio Free Asia (“RFA”), as well as the decision to provide a license to the independent *Cambodian Journalists Alliance* (“CamboJA”). Despite these small improvements, journalists still face numerous barriers to conducting their work freely and exercising their right to freedom of expression in Cambodia, and press freedom remains a mere aspiration.

Journalists, such as Uon Chhin and Yeang Sothearin, are the target of sustained attacks for exercising their freedom of expression, suggesting a growing hostility towards journalists and free speech. Uon Chhin and Yeang Sothearin, two former RFA journalists known for their investigative journalism on issues of social justice, were arrested on 14 November 2017 and charged by the Phnom Penh Municipal Court with supplying a foreign state with information prejudicial to national defense, under Article 445 of Cambodia’s Criminal Code and with the alleged production of pornography under Article 39 of the Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation. The pair were held in pre-trial detention in Prey Sar prison for over nine months before being released on bail and placed under judicial supervision on 21 August 2018. On 3 October 2019 the Phnom Penh Municipal Court failed to deliver a verdict on the grounds that further investigation was required, indicating a lack of credible evidence against the pair. The pair’s appeals against the decision to re-investigate have also been denied under anomalous procedural grounds leaving them in limbo and inhibiting a resolution or definitive verdict to their case over two and a half years since their original arrest.

We also express our concern at the rise in rhetoric regarding ‘fake news’. Legitimate, investigative work from journalists has been disparagingly labelled as ‘fake news’ by authorities to punish dissent and critical speech. Such rhetoric is very damaging and discourages the exercise of free speech. Over recent months the RGC has also used accusations of ‘fake news’ to suppress information and opinion sharing regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Their actions have included the arrest of 30 individuals for both public social media posts and private conversation regarding the virus, the arrest of reporter Sovann Rithy and TVFB’s license revocation.

Chak Sopheap, Executive Director of CCHR comments: *“Journalism is not a crime and should not be treated as such. Press freedom is guaranteed under domestic and international law and ought to be encouraged not stifled. Respecting the right to freedom of expression and ensuring a space in which journalists can conduct their work freely and safely without fear of reprisal are important steps toward building a strong democracy and rule of law. The RGC must take concrete actions to uphold press freedom and encourage independent media, including the cessation of judicial harassment and other forms against journalists.”*

CCHR calls for the RGC to drop all baseless charges against journalists, ensuring freedom for them to perform their legitimate and valuable role without fear. We further call for the amendment or repeal of all laws and policies that restrict press freedom and the rights of journalists.

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For more information, please contact:

Ms. Chak Sopheap Executive Director, email: chaksopheap@cchrcambodia.org, or tel: +855 (0) 11 943 213.

Notes to the Editor:

CCHR, founded in November 2002, is a non-aligned, independent, non-governmental organization that works to promote and protect democracy and respect for human rights throughout Cambodia. CCHR is a member of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), the global network for freedom of expression, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) SOS-Torture Network, Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA), and OECD Watch.

The Cambodian Human Rights Portal www.sithi.org/ is the 2011 winner of the Information Society Innovation Fund Award in the category of Rights and Freedoms and the 2013 winner of the Communication for Social Change Award awarded by the Centre for Communication and Social Change at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia.