

Joint Statement: Cambodian Journalists' Continued Imprisonment Unjustified

February 14, 2018

The continued imprisonment of Cambodian journalists **Oun Chhin** and **Yeang Sothearin** - arrested in November amid the government's attack on media freedom - is cruel, unjustified, and contravenes commitments to uphold the rights to freedom of expression as outlined in the Cambodian Constitution, a consortium of five international and local journalists organizations said on Wednesday.

The unwarranted treason and espionage charges leveled against the journalists - for which they face seven to 15 years in jail - are inappropriate and are clearly related to the government's legal harassment and official intimidation of U.S. broadcaster Radio Free Asia (RFA), Chhin and Sothearin's former employer. The pre-trial detention of the journalists and the suffering it has caused their families is unacceptable.

On the third month of their detention, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA), the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM) and the Overseas Press Club of Cambodia (OPCC) all call for Chhin and Sothearin's immediate release. Meanwhile, journalists and supporters are urged to follow developments on the case and campaign for their release at facebook.com/FreeJournalistsKH

"Chhin and Sothearin's cases clearly show that the law and the judicial system are being used to intimidate the entire press," said Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF's Asia-Pacific desk. *"They must be released immediately. We relay the deep concern of many journalists on the ground after Cambodia's crackdown against independent media. International organizations need to understand the gravity of what is happening in Phnom Penh. The denial of media freedom means the end of a 25-year democratic transition after the trauma of the Khmer Rouge genocide. This is what lies behind the pair's arrest."*

Chhin and Sothearin were arrested November 14 by Meanchey district police in Phnom Penh investigating video equipment set up in a local guesthouse, suspecting an unlicensed karaoke production studio, the Phnom Penh Post reported. Finding that the equipment once belonged to RFA - the broadcaster had hastily shuttered its newsroom in September amid government pressure - Chhin and Sothearin were detained and later charged with *"supplying [a] foreign state with information prejudicial to national defence"* under Article 445 of the Criminal Code.

Prior to the arrests, the Information and Interior ministries had warned that any journalists still working for RFA would be treated as spies. In a sweeping crackdown, the government had already closed down dozens of local radio stations broadcasting RFA and other critical content, threatened RFA and others - including Voice of America and *The Cambodia Daily* - with dubious tax investigations, and accused RFA of colluding against the government.

Chhin, Sothearin and RFA have denied that the pair were still involved with the U.S. broadcaster, which has continued to produce Khmer-language news from Washington and

Bangkok. Prosecutors and the courts have yet to produce any evidence implicating Chhin and Sothearin in a crime.

The rights for freedom of expression and the press are protected under Article 41 of Cambodia's Constitution, and the legal actions taken against Chhin and Sothearin are acts of intimidation, not due process.

Chhin and Sothearin remain in Prey Sar prison awaiting trial, for which a date has not yet been set.

(Photos available on Facebook page)

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