



## **Journalists fear media environment of self-censorship**

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Journalists in Cambodia are currently facing problems of self-censorship, lawsuits and a competitive market, media experts said Thursday, but they said news organizations must continue to hold to principles of professional and a duty to the public.

The trend in oppression of Cambodian journalists have shifted from street attacks, threats of violence and murder to one of punitive legal measures by powerful interests, Moeun Chhean Nariddh, director of the Cambodia Institute for Media Studies, told “Hello VOA.”

In recent years, journalists have had to face a number of lawsuits or jail terms, especially under a criminalized defamation law.

This has created an environment where journalists self censor by avoiding issues like corruption and human rights abuses, he said. The best counter measure, he said, is accurate reporting in the public’s interest.

“Journalists are not afraid once they get the facts correct,” he said.

The self-censorship by journalists comes at a time where the Internet and multi-media options have created a competitive market, he said, and he urged traditional media—newspapers, radio and TV—to pay better attention to the needs of the public.

“If they continue to broadcast unqualified news, or news of low professionalism, the public will withdraw their confidence in them,” he said.

Meanwhile, VOA Khmer is currently facing contempt-of-court charges by the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal, for its reporting of confidential court documents on cases 003 and 004. Rights groups and court monitors have said they fear the two cases are not being fully pursued by the court due to political pressure from Prime Minister Hun Sen’s government, which opposes their going forward.

However, Moeun Chhean Nariddh said the “obligation” of journalists “is different from the courts, police or human rights activists.”

“Our job is to tell the truth to the public,” he said, adding, “We don’t see any [personal] gain in providing the news.”

VOA Khmer reporter Sok Khemara, whose reporting in Cambodia last month is at the center of the contempt charges, told “Hello VOA” Thursday that he had received a number of threats and acts of intimidation in his 20-year career as a reporter.

This has included threats from government officials who demanded he give up confidential sources or stop reporting a subject altogether, he said.

“Whatever the threats against me, as a journalist, I have a responsibility to bring the truth to the public,” he said. “We don’t work for ourselves, but rather the public.”

In July and August, Sok Khemara traveled to remote Cambodian villages to interview three suspects in cases 003 and 004, reporting that he said contributed to better informing both victims and suspects on the work of the tribunal.

His reporting included citation of a November 2008 prosecutor’s submission that had been publicized in the international media earlier in the year.

However, the office of the investigating judges say VOA Khmer violated the confidentiality rules of the court and began contempt proceedings.

Moeun Chhean Nariddh said he worried that a contempt charge against an international news agency like the Voice of America, which is funded by the US government, would cause local journalists to curtail their reporting on the court.

“This makes local journalists think on whether they dare publish that news or not,” he said. “That makes us all lose.”