Proper Investigation is needed into the case of murdered journalist

Media Comment – Phnom Penh, 12 September 2012

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) and the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) are deeply concerned about the case of Mr. Hang Serei Odom, a journalist from Virakchun Khmer Daily newspaper in Ratanakkiri, who was found dead inside the trunk of his car yesterday. Hang Serei Odom reported on illegal logging and had in the last four months of working with the Virakchun Khmer Daily newspaper, uncovered several cases linked to powerful, well-connected Cambodian elite. CCHR and SEAPA call for a thorough investigation in to this case that is closely related to press freedom and freedom of expression in Cambodia.

According to a report in the Cambodia Daily newspaper dated 12 September 2012, Mr. Serei Odom went missing on Sunday after he told his family that he was going out for a short while to meet with a “Mr. Heng”. When he did not return, his wife, Im Chanthy, called the police. On Tuesday, his body was found in the trunk of his car. According to Rin Ratanak, Editor-in-Chief of the Virakchun Khmer Daily, Mr. Serei Odom wrote fearlessly about illegal logging for luxury wood in Ratanakkiri and the stories he reported had a negative impact on the businesses of connected powerful officials. Rin Ratanak also added, “If my reporter wrongly reported those logging cases, he should have faced the Press Law, not been murdered”.

This is the first case of a journalist being killed since the 2008 murder of Khim Sambo, who worked for opposition-aligned newspaper, Moneakseka Khmer, and wrote extensively on nepotism and corruption within the ruling Cambodian Peoples Party. He and his 21 year old son were shot dead just two weeks before the 2008 national elections and justice has yet to be served in the case. According to data hosted on the human rights portal, www.sithi.org, a total of ten journalists have been killed since 1994.

Ms. Ramana Sorn, Coordinator of CCHR’s Cambodian Freedom of Expression Project said in response to the murder:

“Although the right to freedom of expression and press freedom are not well-protected in Cambodia, in recent years we haven’t seen any cases of journalists being murdered. However it only takes one journalist to be killed, and for the murder to result in impunity, to send a strong, intimidating message to all other Cambodian media workers to be more wary and to practise self-censorship. Free expression in the media is absolutely necessary in a democracy to inform citizens and to allow for healthy debate. This case must therefore be meticulously investigated to find the genuine perpetrator(s) and to bring them to justice.”
Ms. Gayathry Venkiteswaran, Executive Director of Southeast Asian Press Alliance (“SEAPA”) said in response to the murder:

“The increasing trend in violence against journalists in Southeast Asia and recent developments in Cambodia demonstrate the risks faced by journalists and human rights activists in representing public interest issues. We call for a thorough investigation into the case to send a signal that the killing of journalists will not be tolerated.”

For more information, please contact Ms. Sorn Ramana, Coordinator of the Cambodian Freedom of Expression Project, via telephone at +855 (0) 77 40 53 63 or e-mail at ramanasorn@cchrcambodia.org, or Ms. Gayathry Venkiteswaran, Executive Director of SEAPA, via telephone at +66 (0) 88 0174810 or email at gayathry@seapa.org