Prime Minister Says VOD Shutdown Strengthens Journalism, Offers Reporters Government Jobs.

A group of human right activists gather in front of VOD’s office in protest against the government’s decision to revoke VOD’s license on February 13, 2023. (CamboJA/Pring Samrang)

Despite a wave of international concern over the shutdown of independent media Voice of Democracy (VOD), Prime Minister Hun Sen said that the outlet’s license will not be restored and offered VOD reporters government jobs instead in a Facebook post Tuesday.

The United Nations and U.S. State Department urged for VOD’s license to be reinstated in separate statements Tuesday.

“Because VOD was closed, there is no opportunity to reinstate [the license],” Hun Sen said in his post. “[I] consider the livelihoods of the staff who have lost their jobs due to leaders’ mistakes. I decided to offer official civil servant [jobs] for those who wish to serve the state.”
Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM) acting director Chhorn Sokhuntea declined to comment on Hun Sen’s offer, while CCIM’s media director Ith Sothoeuth said the decision was up to each VOD staff member.

“However, we hope our staff will stay with us as we try to reach a solution as soon as possible,” Sothoeuth said.

VOD English editor Danielle Keaton-Olsen said she feels VOD reporters have been “targeted with personal attacks” and hoped the government would avoid putting former VOD staffers in a “hostile workplace.”

“I personally don’t believe this offer was actually about giving our staff opportunities,” said VOD English editor Danielle Keeton-Olsen. “It’s obviously to appease anyone, locally and internationally, who was also shocked and angered by the decision to revoke our license.”

Hun Sen appeared to reject foreign embassies’ concerns about the loss of one of Cambodia’s last remaining independent media outlets.

“Foreigners have no right to order us to do this or that or whatever they want because it is our internal affairs,” Hun Sen said. “The shutdown of unethical radio [VOD], it does not kill press freedom in Cambodia but the opposite: it will help to implement the law and strengthen ethical journalism in Cambodia.”

The Foreign Affairs Ministry claimed the shutdown of VOD aligned with Cambodian law because VOD had been “spreading fake news.”

“An administrative action against a rule-breaking entity does not merit any worry at all,” the Ministry said in a Tuesday statement. “What should be alarming is the mounting disinformation and international slanders.”

The Ministry claimed that “some foreign embassies” — presumably the more than a dozen governments which issued statements of concern against VOD’s closure — followed a “biased narrative [which] turned their blind eyes to the indisputable fact that the media center [VOD] grossly breached profession of journalism.”

The Ministry warned other governments to not intervene, citing the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

The statement also asserted that VOD’s reporting had “harmed [the] honor and prestige of [the] Cambodian government” and cited Article 10 of Cambodia’s press law, claiming VOD had published “with malicious intent.”

But UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk said in a Tuesday statement that the government’s decision to close VOD was not legally justifiable.
The closure “was not preceded by a thorough and transparent process as required under Cambodia’s own press law, and fails to meet the test of legality, necessity and proportionality that international human rights law requires for any permissible restriction on freedom of expression,” he said.

Cambodian human rights groups said the government appeared to be misinterpreting the Press Law in attempting to legally justify shutting down VOD.

Adhoc Senior Investigator Soeng Senkaruna noted a government spokesperson had been quoted in the VOD Khmer article appearing to confirm Hun Manet’s role in authorizing aid — the assertion which led to the outlet’s closure.

“When a journalist has a source, and the source confirmed like that, and they have published exactly what the source said, I think it is not VOD’s mistake, and it is important for that source to respond by providing information to the media,” Senkaruna said.

Information Ministry secretary of state Pen Bona claimed Phay Siphan had never confirmed Hun Manet signed aid. But the article quoted Siphan as saying “it is not wrong” for Hun Manet to play his father’s role. Siphan could not be reached for comment.

Bona added that the Prime Minister’s son had been “victimized” and denied the information in the article. VOD Khmer later published an article noting Hun Manet’s denial.

Licadho operations director Am Sam Ath noted Article 10 of Cambodia’s Press Law provides legal avenues for public figures to seek retractions and reply from publishers in the event of false information being published.

“When using the Press Law to revoke VOD’s license, the government should have balanced the purpose of the legislation, not taking the unproportioned decision to shut down VoD but removing the problematic article,” said Chak Sopheap, Cambodian Center for Human Rights’ executive director.

“If the government claims to protect press freedom in Cambodia, the apology letter [issued by VOD] should have been enough not to do permanent harm to the already deteriorated media landscape.”

U.S. State Department spokesperson Ned Price joined a growing list of dozens of civil society and foreign embassies when he said Tuesday that the U.S. remained “deeply concerned” over VOD’s closure.

The United States had supported VOD “through training and capacity building activities,” U.S. Embassy spokesperson Stephanie Arzate told CamboJA News in an emailed statement.
“The decision [to close VOD] is particularly troubling due to the chilling impact it will have on freedom of expression and on access to information ahead of the national elections in July,” Price said.

“We urge Cambodian authorities to reverse this decision,” he added.