INTRODUCTION
On 3 May, the world celebrated World Press Freedom Day. This edition of the Sithi Project bi-monthly newsletter, the fourth to date, thus focuses on freedom of expression, featuring two items – the recently published map of harassment of media cases and the death of environmental activist Chut Wutty – two topics that illustrate the perilous state of freedom of expression in Cambodia.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right which allows everybody the freedom to hold opinions and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any medium. Although this right is protected under both Cambodian national law and international law, the current situation of freedom of expression in Cambodia is dismal.

CCHR LAUNCHES HARASSMENT OF MEDIA MAP

On 3 May 2012, CCHR released a new map on the Sithi.org Portal addressing harassment of the media in Cambodia. The map results from a study which examined proven and alleged incidents of harassment of individuals working throughout the media in Cambodia, including journalists, publishers, television presenters and photographers. Through monitoring Khmer and English language news sources and reports, the study found that a total of 123 cases of various forms of potential harassment of the media from January 2008 to December 2011, occurring in 18 separate provinces. While the figure is a significant cause for concern, it is assumed that the number of cases is actually higher as other cases of harassment of media professionals are likely to have occurred but went unreported.

The map provides a user-friendly way to access information about the cases – through providing in-depth case descriptions – and to identify where harassment of the media is particularly prevalent. The map is supplemented by an analysis of the data, which includes graphs and charts, and provides additional information on the issue of harassment of the media in Cambodia.

Some key findings included that over 50% of the reported cases happened in the two largest cities in Cambodia – Phnom Penh (40.6%) and Siem Reap (16.2%) – and that 16.2% of all reported cases occurred in the provinces that Prey Lang forest touches (Kampong Thom, Kratie, Preah Vihear and Steung Treng). Furthermore, the analysis shows that a
significant portion of cases – 23.3% of all incidents reported – involved threats to use or actual use of criminal procedures. Threats to use or actual use of civil procedure made up 15.5% of the cases recorded while 14.8% involved violence.

The study and map are part of a comprehensive body of work undertaken by CCHR on freedom of expression in Cambodia, which includes publishing reports, issuing press releases and media comments, analyzing relevant laws and engaging in advocacy activities with various categories of stakeholders, all aimed at increasing the respect for freedom of expression as a fundamental human right.

The Harassment of Media 2008-2011 map is presented on the award-winning CCHR-hosted Cambodian Human Rights Portal “sithi.org”. The information presented on the map is also available to download in Excel spreadsheet format from the website.

SITHI PROJECT SUPPORTS CHUT WUTTY MEMORIAL
On 26 April 2012, the founder and director of the Natural Resource Protection Group and a prominent environmental rights activist in Cambodia, Chut Wutty, was shot dead in Koh Kong province, where he was documenting illegal logging with two journalists. Although a government-established investigative committee concluded that Chut Wutty’s death occurred as a result of a personal dispute, the circumstances around his death remain unclear and thus require further, more transparent investigations.

Chut Wutty’s death has exemplified not only the growing insecurity that human and environmental rights activists face in Cambodia but also the extent to which the authorities are willing to go to stifle criticism and, as a result, freedom of expression.

In response to his death and to the continued plunder of Cambodia’s natural resources, people from around Cambodia gathered in Koh Kong on 10 May to participate in a CCHR-supported memorial ceremony for Chut Wutty, who dedicated his life to the protection of the environment in Cambodia. Some participants also decided to observe and patrol the forest where Chut Wutty was fatally shot, in order to gather information and document the devastation of natural resources in the area.

Further exemplifying the Royal Government of Cambodia’s willingness to impede upon the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and movement, local authorities engaged in several tactics aimed at diminishing the impact of the memorial, including prohibiting some people from traveling to Koh Kong, making notes of which activists were speaking publicly during the memorial, calling villagers during the ceremony demanding that they return home, and questioning villagers about their activities upon their return home.

CCHR financially and logistically supported the three-day event, and the Sithi team attended in a monitoring capacity. Find out more about the memorial campaign by reading our report.

ABOUT THE SITHI PROJECT
Sithi means ‘rights’ in Khmer. The Sithi Project aims at increasing awareness and understanding of human rights – especially civil and political rights – and their status in Cambodia.

Editor’s Note: the publication of this newsletter was delayed due to changes in staff. Please accept our apologies for any inconvenience caused. The fifth edition of the newsletter will be released on 31 July 2012.