Rights Monitors, Journalists Threatened Over Taking Photos at Rally

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- Tran Techseng
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Authorities grab a camera during a small protest outside the Chinese Embassy in Phnom Penh on October 23, 2020. (Matt Surrusco/VOD)

A Phnom Penh deputy governor was among authorities who harassed rights monitors and journalists, threatening to confiscate their cameras and phones, at a small opposition rally outside the Chinese Embassy on Friday, with a media advocate calling the authorities’ actions “unacceptable intimidation.”

Three protesters were arrested at the rally on Friday while marking the 29-year anniversary of the Paris Peace Agreements, which formally ended years of conflict and mandated that Cambodia pursue a multiparty democracy. About 15 protesters participated in the rally, opposing what
they said was the government flouting the agreement and violating democratic principles.

On Monday, Phnom Penh Municipal Court spokesperson Y Rin said the three arrested protesters, Lim San, 57, Ton Nimol, 40, and Yoy Srey Mom, 52, had been charged with incitement to disturb social security and placed in pretrial detention at Prey Sar prison.

The main opposition CNRP was banned in 2017 amid a crackdown on civil society and independent media, leading to the ruling CPP sweeping all 125 seats in the National Assembly in 2018. Almost 50 activists, opposition supporters and others have been arrested this year over participation in rallies, online expression and other issues.

Beginning around 8:15 a.m. on Friday, a uniformed guard was seen pushing down on a man’s phone as he held it up to record gathering protesters, according to reporters at the scene. Over the next half hour, plain-clothed officers ordered several journalists to stop taking photos.

Around 8:30 a.m., Phnom Penh deputy governor Mean Chanyada was filmed pressuring a Khmer Times journalist to give up his camera, while an official standing next to the deputy governor took it off the journalist’s neck. Chanyada then strode up to a VOD reporter who was filming the scene and aggressively yelled, “Give me your phone,” and pushed him along the sidewalk.

(Matt Surrusco/VOD)

Chak Sopheap, director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, said district guards had threatened two of its rights monitors as they worked.
“When our staff were trying to work to monitor the gathering protesters, the authorities came to chase them away and threatened to take their phones away if they still continued,” Sopheap said.

In a joint statement, journalists’ association CamboJA and the Cambodian Center for Independent Media, VOD’s parent organization, said at least six journalists had been “intimidated and threatened” at the rally.

They were told to give up their phones, stop shooting live video or had their camera taken away, the statement said.

Journalist Gerry Flynn said he was covering the protest for Thmey Thmey on Friday, and was being pushed back from observing the protesters when a walkie-talkie hit him in the face.

He turned around and an officer yelled at him, he said. A U.N. observer at the scene intervened, and told him that the guard had shouted, “Better watch out because you’re in the land of Cambodians,” Flynn said.

A freelance cameraman he was with also had his lens grabbed, and authorities tried to get into the cameraman’s bag, Flynn added.

Khan Leakhena, a VOD reporter, said she saw a protester fall on the sidewalk, and pulled out her phone to take pictures. A man in civilian clothes approached her, shouting and ordering her to stop shooting, and tried to grab the phone from her, Leakhena said.

Mech Dara, another VOD reporter, said he and several other reporters were repeatedly ordered to stop filming, including a journalist working for Reuters.
An Asia spokesperson for Reuters declined to comment. The Khmer Times has not responded to emailed questions. The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights also did not respond to questions. Chanyada, the deputy governor, on Saturday denied knowledge of the incidents and referred questions to the City Hall spokesperson.

City Hall spokesperson Met Measpheakdey said he did not know the details of what happened on Friday and did not answer questions about the deputy governor being personally involved in the harassment.

“Generally, I can say that journalists have the right and ability to take pictures if it doesn’t affect or block authorities from implementing their duties,” Measpheakdey said.

CCIM’s media director, Ith Sothoeuth, said the work of journalists was supposed to be guaranteed under law. “These threats will further pressure and restrict the freedom of journalists in Cambodia.”

Nop Vy, CamboJA’s executive director, said the authorities’ actions were “unacceptable.”

“This is a sign of unacceptable intimidation as journalists were fulfilling their professional work,” said Vy, who was CCIM’s previous media director. “Authorities likely consider journalists to be an important observer who make it difficult for them to crack down on protesters.”

According to the Criminal Code, extortion — the act or attempt to obtain any asset by violence, threat of violence or coercion — is punishable by two to five years in jail.
Details: https://vodenglish.news/rights-monitors-journalists-threatened-over-taking-photos-at-rally/?fbclid=IwAR0JS29jgyJnuKoJ-x5x2seZM4rCRC_oFkMrqNjtX780GJvs688AXYXuU8