THE first deputy president of the National Assembly has hit back at allegations that he employs an excessive number of advisers, and says he is considering filing a defamation suit against opposition lawmakers in response to the criticism.

Last week, 13 lawmakers from the opposition Sam Rainsy Party wrote a letter to National Assembly President Heng Samrin alleging that deputy president Nguon Nhel employs 71 different advisers and asking Heng Samrin to investigate this “irregularity”. Yesterday, however, Nguon Nhel defended his use of the advisers, saying they were a necessary part of his work for the legislature.

“I need advisers to work for people in the provinces and other places,” Nguon Nhel said. “They are working to collect information from people, and they are intervening to assist people whenever they have any problems.”

Nguon Nhel declined to confirm the number of advisers he employed, but said all worked diligently and were appointed through legal channels.

“I am considering filing a complaint against the Sam Rainsy Party for defaming me,” he added.

The SRP lawmakers alleged that the government pays a total of US$26,730 each month to Nguon Nhel’s advisers, including Hang Vichet, the Assembly secretariat’s financial department chief, and Nhem Thavy, a lawmaker from Kampong Thom province who is Nguon Nhel’s brother-in-law.

Nguon Nhel said yesterday that he was unsure why the SRP considered his familial relations relevant.

Observers said the quarrel raised questions about efficiency and transparency in Cambodia’s public administration.

Koul Panha, executive director of local election monitor Comfrel, said advisers played an important role at the Assembly but were concentrated unnecessarily among high-ranking officials.

“We need strong advisers ... but it should be a fair distribution,” he said.

Cambodian Centre for Human Rights president Ou Virak said, though, that the proliferation of government advisers was in most cases a waste of revenue.

“Everybody in Cambodia knows that these people don’t really report to work – they don’t advise,” Ou Virak said. He also questioned the legality of those already employed by the National Assembly drawing second salaries in advisory roles.

The International Monetary Fund warned last September that “very large increases in the civil service and military wage bill” were helping to run up the Kingdom’s deficit to unsustainable levels. SRP lawmaker Son Chhay called yesterday for the government to audit Nguon Nhel’s
staff and identify unjustified expenses.

Cheam Yeap, head of the National Assembly’s Finance and Banking Committee, said yesterday that he employed three advisers and, like other lawmakers, had doled out these roles appropriately.

“We do not appoint people who do not work and just come to collect their salary,” he said.