Groups Report Decline in Press Freedom in 2009

Chun Sakada, VOA Khmer | Phnom Penh Monday, 03 May 2010

Cambodia remains a difficult place to practice journalism, with courts used by powerful officials and businessmen to pressure the media, journalists and rights workers said Monday, on World Press Freedom Day.

In the one year since the last Press Freedom Day, 24 Cambodian journalists were arrested and 10 sued by powerful interests, the Cambodian Club of Journalists said in a statement.

Reporters Without Borders ranks Cambodia No. 117 of 174 countries in press freedom.

Those arrested include Hang Chakra, editor of the opposition-aligned Khmer Mchas Srok newspaper, who was released in April after serving nearly 10 months of a one-year sentence.

He was held on defamation charges after reporting on alleged corruption within the powerful Council of Ministers, headed by Deputy Prime Minister Sok An.
“I request that government to be open to real press freedom, without restrictions,” Hang Chakra, whose paper began publishing again on the weekend, said Monday. “I ask the government not to use the courts to dominate journalists.”

Another journalist, Ros Sokhet, was sentenced to two years in jail in November, on defamation charges, for sending disparaging text messages to CTN TV anchor Soy Sopheap. He remains in jail.

“Now journalists continue to face threats and intimidation, as charges with political motives have been raised against members of the press to stop debates relating to politics and criticism,” said Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights. “The government should avoid the use of the courts to pressure journalists.”

Um Sarin, president of the Cambodian Association for the Protection of Journalists, said press freedom in Cambodia has declined. But he acknowledged that sometimes stories are unbalanced because officials fail to respond to journalists’ queries.

“Some professional journalists face difficulties writing fair enough articles for the public and society, because other parties in the article can’t be reached for comment, so some articles were sued,” he said.