CPJ seeks halt to Cambodia's media crackdown

New York, January 18, 2006—The Committee to Protect Journalists condemns the politicized prosecution of Cambodian journalists and calls on Prime Minister Hun Sen to drop all criminal defamation charges against Mom Sonando, Kem Sokha, and Pa Guon Tieng. The prime minister ordered the men released on bail Tuesday to coincide with a visit by U.S. diplomat Christopher Hill but his government has made clear that it intends to prosecute them.

"Prime Minister Hun Sen is aware of those concerns and to demonstrate his compassion, he is sending a letter to the court ordering that those being detained are released on bail," government spokesman Om Yentieng told reporters when the release was announced. "This is a gift for Mr. Christopher on the day of the inauguration of the new embassy," Om Yentieng said.

Christopher was in Phnom Penh to inaugurate the new U.S. Embassy compound in the capital. The United States has joined other countries in condemning the detentions as a means of silencing opponents.

Union leader Rong Chhun, who was also charged with criminal defamation, was released at the same time.

Hun Sen's government has jailed a number of journalists and activists in recent months, undermining the legal safeguards for freedom of expression and press freedom enshrined in the country's 1993 constitution and 1994 Press Act. The journalists have been charged with violating criminal defamation laws that were in force before the passage of the more democratic 1993 charter and that are punishable by one-year prison terms and fines of up to 10 million riels (US$2,600).

"Hun Sen's actions serve only to remind everyone that the Cambodian legal system is subservient to his will. The legal process becomes a charade when people are yanked in and out of jail to serve political interests," Cooper said. "We call directly on the prime minister to end his concerted and specious legal assault on press freedom."

Cambodian authorities jailed Sambok Khmum (Beehive Radio) 105 FM journalist Mam Sonando October 11, 2005 on criminal defamation charges for critical reports he aired about a controversial border demarcation treaty with Vietnam.

On December 31, Kem Sokha was arrested on criminal defamation charges related to critical comments about the government written on a banner that the rights group publicly displayed during International Human Rights Day on December 10.

Journalist and human rights activist Pa Guon Tieng was arrested on January 4, 2006, by border police while...
reporting in northeastern Stung Treng province. On January 5, Pa was formally charged as an accomplice to criminal defamation because of his participation in a demonstration in Phnom Penh which criticized the government for the border agreement.

Another print journalist, Hang Sakhorn, was jailed in December on similar charges for reporting that a court official had accepted bribes which allegedly influenced his decision in a politically charged land dispute case. He remains in custody.

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