

Charges Against Couple Accused of Journalist's Murder Dropped

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The Ratanakkiri Provincial Court yesterday dropped the charges against a military police officer and his wife who were alleged to have been involved in the murder of an investigative journalist, and ordered their release, a lawyer said Wednesday.

Hang Serei Odom, 42, a reporter for the Virakchun Khmer Daily, was found hacked to death, his body stuffed in the trunk of his Toyota Camry, in O'Chum district on September 11. In the months before his murder, he had written about officials involved in the illegal luxury timber trade.

Two days after his body was found, military police Captain An Bunheng and his wife, Sim Vy, were arrested when police discovered a pair of Hang Serei Odom's shoes in the couple's restaurant, where he had been drinking the night before he disappeared. While the court investigation concluded that they were the only suspects, human rights groups and the victim's family said they believed that others must have at least known about the killing.

Tep Monycheat, a lawyer for the two suspects, said Wednesday the court had dropped all charges against his clients and that they might be released today.

"The court decided to drop charges since there is no concrete inculpatory evidence against my two clients," Mr. Monycheat said, adding that he regrets the death of the journalist. "I just performed my job to help my clients and I feel sorry for the family of the dead journalist."

After initial court hearings in March and April, a panel of three judges decided that there was a lack of evidence and ordered court president Suos La to conduct a reinvestigation, which concluded last month.

Chhay Thy, provincial coordinator for rights group Adhoc—who has been monitoring the case and attended the verdict announcement—said the provincial court held a hearing on August 2 and questioned a number of new witnesses who claimed to have heard somebody shouting for help from the couple's restaurant on the night the journalist was murdered.

He added that the defense lawyers had also presented results from a Vietnamese laboratory that analyzed a blanket found in the couple's restaurant that was thought to have the journalist's blood on it. But the lab results showed that the red stains were not blood, Mr. Thy said.

However, a large amount of vital evidence against the couple had been disregarded, he said.

"The decision to drop the charges is an injustice for the victim's family and the slain journalist's wife will fear for her security," he said.

The wife of the journalist, Im Chanthy, said she was shocked when the presiding judge announced the verdict, and called it a "huge injustice."

"There is no justice for poor people like me. I will appeal for my dead husband," she said.

Local journalists who report on the lucrative illegal timber and luxury wood trade, which is often linked to powerful people, regularly face threats. Rights groups and the U.N. have condemned the murder of Hang Serei Odom.

Pen Samitthy, head of the Club of Cambodian Journalists, said the verdict contradicts some of the evidence provided earlier in the case.

“I appeal to the supervisor of Ratanakkiri court to review this decision of the judge, and give justice to the family and to all journalists,” he said.

Pa Nguon Teang, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Independent Media, said the questionable court investigation and the verdict were a threat to media freedom in Cambodia.

“If the court is truly independent and the court wants to conduct a proper investigation, I think the evidence can be found,” he said. “This is a threat—that they released the suspect is a threat to the freedom of press, which is already at risk.”

According to the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), Hang Serei Odom is the 11th journalist to be assassinated in Cambodia since 1994, and all of these cases remain unsolved.

“[Hang Serei Odom] is now the eleventh journalist whose murder has been met with impunity,” said CCHR in a statement Wednesday.

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