

URGENT ACTION

FORMER JOURNALISTS CHARGED WITH ESPIONAGE

Two former journalists for US-based *Radio Free Asia* in Cambodia were detained in the capital, Phnom Penh in November 2017 on trumped-up charges of espionage. They have been denied bail. If convicted, they face up to 15 years' imprisonment. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience.

Two former *Radio Free Asia* (RFA) journalists, **Uon Chhin** and **Yeang Sothearin** were arrested at Marady Hotel in Phnom Penh's Steung Meanchey district in the evening of 14 November 2017 by a mixed group of 20 security forces. They were alleged to have illegally set up a broadcast studio with the purpose of continuing to file news reports to RFA's headquarters in the United States.

On 14 November 2017 at 7 pm, Uon Chhin was in his room at Marady Hotel when security forces arrived. He called Yeang Sothearin about 30 minutes later, requesting him to come to confirm that he was operating a small karaoke/video production business out of the hotel room. After Yeang Sothearin arrived, they were questioned for one hour and then both men were arrested and taken to Municipal Police Headquarters in Phnom Penh. In the morning of 16 November 2017, municipal police officers took the two men back to the hotel room to continue their investigation and search the premises. On 18 November, upon having been questioned by the Deputy Prosecutor of Phnom Penh's Court of First Instance, the investigating judge decided to investigate both men on the basis of suspicion of espionage for allegedly having supplied "a foreign state or its agents" with information which "undermines national defence" under Article 445 of Criminal Code and ordered their pre-trial detention at Phnom Penh's Correctional Centre 1 (CC1). If convicted, they face 7 to 15 years' imprisonment. On 4 December, the judge denied their bail request, alleging that they were flight risks and may hamper the judge's judicial investigation.

The employment contracts of Uon Chhin and Yeang Sothearin, and all other Cambodian journalists in the RFA were terminated when RFA decided to shut its operations in Cambodia on 12 September. The termination of RFA's nearly 20-year operation was a result of months of harassment from the authorities. Their arrest comes in the context of a relentless onslaught on independent media, stifling free expression on and offline, as the Cambodian authorities' aim to silence critics in the months leading up to the General Election scheduled for 29 July 2018.

Please write immediately in English, Khmer or your own language:

- Calling on the authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Uon Chhin and Yeang Sothearin, as prisoners of conscience detained and charged solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, and drop all charges against them;
- Urging the authorities to stop resorting to intimidation, surveillance and legal actions to stifle press freedom and limit the space for freedom of expression.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 18 JANUARY 2017 TO:

Minister of Public Security and Deputy Prime Minister
Sar Kheng
75 Norodom Blvd
Khan Chamkarmon
Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Fax: +855 23 426 585
Salutation: Your Excellency

Prime Minister
Samdech Hun Sen
Office of the Prime Minister
Jok Dimitrov Boulevard Phnom Penh,
Cambodia
Fax: +855 23 360 666 / +855 23 880
624(c/o Council of Ministers)
Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:
Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
Prak Sokhonn
No. 3 Samdech Hun Sen Street Khan
Chamcar Mon
Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Fax: + 855 23 216 141
Salutation: Your Excellency

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. HIS EXCELLENCY MR MEAS KIM HENG, Royal Embassy of Cambodia, 64 Brondesbury Park Willesden Green NW6 7AT, 020 8451 7997, Fax 020 8451 7594, cambodianembassy@btconnect.com, www.cambodianembassy.org.uk, Salutation: Your Excellency
Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Radio Free Asia (RFA) closed its Phnom Penh Bureau on 12 September 2017, citing government repression, threats against reporters and the closure of its FM broadcasts as reasons for the move. Officials from the Ministry of Information were quoted in local media threatening to arrest any former RFA journalists who continued to report for RFA. The arrest and the trumped up charges against Uon Chhin and Yeang Sothearin appear to be a deliberate tactic used by the authorities to intimidate and discourage any Cambodian journalists from continuing to report news for the US-based headquarters of RFA. RFA has denied retaining any staff in Cambodia.

On 19 November 2017, a group of more than 60 Cambodian journalists issued an open letter, calling for the release of the two former RFA journalists. The journalist who started the petition has since fled the country after coming under surveillance. Other journalists have also reported increased surveillance and have left the country out of fear of arrest.

The closing of RFA's Cambodia operations comes in a wider context of a relentless attack on independent media, civil society and the political opposition in Cambodia, ahead of the General Elections in 2018. Cambodia has seen in the past months more than 30 nationwide transmissions of RFA, Voice of America, Voice of Democracy and opposition-aligned Mohanokor radio, taken off the air. Cambodia's rural population remains highly reliant on these radio stations as their only source of independent or critical news; they often lack Internet access in remote areas. Television channels have strong affiliations to the Government.

On 4 September 2017, independent newspaper, *The Cambodia Daily*, closed down after being slapped with an unaudited US\$6.3 million tax bill, widely seen as a government attempt to force closure. Two of its former reporters still face incitement charges for their reporting around the Commune Council Elections in June 2017. Moreover, on 16 November, former *Cambodia Daily* reporter, Len Leng, was detained for more than seven hours when she attempted to attend the public hearing of the Supreme Court which resulted in the dissolution of the main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP).

In recent months, ordinary citizens expressing their opinions online have become the target of a string of arrests, mainly over Facebook posts criticising Prime Minister Hun Sen.

The systematic and ramped up silencing of foreign-funded media outlets falls within the ruling party's narrative of what the government describes as an opposition-led "colour revolution", seeking to overthrow the current Government, which is alleged to be funded and supported by the U.S. Government as well as receiving support from civil society and independent media.