

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/cambodia-what-can-really-be-done-against-23-11-2013,45506.html>

Asia - Cambodia

Impunity Day

What can really be done against impunity? Show time!

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Reporters Without Borders and its partner organization, the Cambodian Centre for Independent Media (CCIM), have written a joint op-ed on impunity in Cambodia that is to be published in the Cambodia Daily newspaper tomorrow, International Day to End Impunity.

Cambodia fell 26 places in the 2013 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index from its position in 2012, and exhibits an unacceptable level of impunity as regards threats and physical violence against journalists.

What can really be done against impunity? Show time!

For the past twenty years, eleven journalists have been killed and none of the perpetrators have been brought to Justice. The case of reporter Heng Serei Oudom, found dead in the truck of his car last year after he was hacked six times, is one more example of the culture of impunity that still prevails in Cambodia. In this case, two suspects were found, one admitted to be aware of the killing, the trial demonstrated the killing happened in their house but the judge did not have enough evidence of their culpability. Both of them were released last August. They stayed almost a year in prison and this is the longest punishment one has seen so far for the killing of a journalist in Cambodia. There is also the possibility that these two suspects are only scapegoats.

The most recent high-profile case was the murder in 2008 of Khim Sambo. Just two weeks before the national elections and after criticising high-ranking officials in the incumbent Cambodian People's party, the opposition-affiliated newspaper journalist was shot and killed by two men on a motorbike. No one was arrested. Was he killed for nothing? Did anyone take his work over?

The rampant impunity in Cambodia shows the government and the powerful have no intention to respect the rule of law or protect human rights.

Journalists are not the only victims of crimes going unpunished as a result of impunity. In 2013, dozens of people have been brought to the court simply because they were speaking too loud. Yorm Bopha is one of them. The clock reversed: instead of bringing culprits to courts, the police arrested their victims. This is possible when one knows he can get away with it and nobody will denounce it. Some journalists have been censoring themselves for a long time. Therefore, they stopped publishing the reports that matter. Have you noticed? Some of the best reports are made by local and international NGOs thanks to their local partners. Not necessarily by newspapers and journalism. Of course, constraints of time are playing. But in Cambodia, constraints of ownership, fear and capacity are also part of the game.

And now, activists and a generation of fearless young journalists are taking over the role of informing people worldwide about their situation. And it works. In 2013 only, three Cambodian citizens were awarded international prizes for their work. For the past two years, the ASEAN chairmanship and the elections of the National Assembly gave the opportunity to expose Cambodia worldwide. But what will happen next year to make the international community bother about the situation? Cambodians need to know and have that right. Independent media is about all of this; telling what is not otherwise told but also making it possible for the media to do so without any conflict of interest. At Voice of Democracy, it is a daily challenge that reporters are overcoming. But they are not the only ones. Yorm Bopha is also part of them. It is the duty of journalists to inform and NGOs to defend, fight and promote.

But today, Cambodia counts over 3,000 NGOs. This makes more than 1 for Cambodian people.

While it should be reasonably doable to help, it sometimes creates a cacophony as everyone has an agenda. As a result, the information flow is now complex for too many purposes. Civil society actors need to agree on. This can be done, for example, by accessing more information and compare it to other. Organizations, such as Reporters Without Borders, need steady accounts from the ground to be able to step in and advocate at an international level. There too, resources and funds are limited. Local partners are crucial in getting verified information to this level. When public service does not exist, sharing information is crucial; it is not only about the fact that some people do not speak out, it also linked to the fact that Cambodian people are still among the poorest in the world, their lands are grabbed, their forest is lost and their natural resources will be scarce if impunity is not stopped.

Explaining the situation to Cambodians should become the role of reporters again, together with a whole generation young people working in the media industry. Every citizen asking for an explanation should be able to find an answer and none of them should be begging for justice. This is not a matter of "culture". It is one of respect. People cannot die silently, for nothing.

For these reasons and because it is urgent, we are asking the government to organize a meeting with local and international NGO and institutions representatives to debate about access to information and the role each one should play in it. It is not about drafting another law that will not be implemented. It is about knowing what Cambodia wants to know. We know how to do it; the government needs to start explaining.

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