

NATIONAL

Verdict Hailed as Victory for Press Freedom in Cambodia

BY TIM STURROCK
AND VAN ROEUN
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Human rights and civil society organizations praised Friday's acquittal of four people, including a radio journalist, of disinformation charges as an advance for press freedom and called on other judges to follow the case as an example.

The case before Takeo Provincial Court may be the first in which a Cambodian court has acquitted a Cambodian journalist of disinformation charges, said Moeun Chhean Narridh, director of the Cambodian Institute for Media Studies.

"This is a good sign, a good development for the media situation in Cambodia, and I hope other court and prosecutors will review previous charges," he said.

The court had charged To Serey, an RFA reporter also known as Sok Serey, with criminal disinformation, while also charging villager Seb Sein as well as Cambodian Center for Human Rights activists Chiep Cheav and Khim Sarom with both disinformation and destruction of property. Villager Ny San, who has been in prison since October, was sentenced on Friday to a five-month prison term and ordered to pay \$250 in compensation for destruction of property.

Mr Chhean Narridh gave three possible reasons for the acquittal, the first being that the court decided to follow the law, which requires a finding of mali-

cious intent for a disinformation conviction.

"One is the general awareness of the Takeo court and judges themselves who know that Cambodian journalists have freedoms," he said.

But he said that this case, unlike many others, did not involve the CPP or the government, meaning the court was under less pressure. He also said the decision could have arisen from a desire to not upset the US government, which funds RFA.

The UN human rights office released a statement on Friday calling the ruling a "significant step towards the protection of the right of human rights defenders and journalists to freely and peacefully express themselves on matters of public interest without fear of reprisals."

"The office encourages magistrates to draw inspiration from this ruling in their interpretation and application of the law in order to limit restrictions on freedom of expression in compliance with Cambodia's human rights treaty obligations," he said.

A statement from the Cambodian Club of Journalists also welcomed the ruling.

"The Club of Cambodian Journalists welcomes and congratulates Takeo Provincial Court's ruling and such a ruling is deemed an example in implementing the procedure related to the freedom of the press and reporters who fulfill their important duties to serve public's interests," the statement said.