



**PRESS RELEASE – PHNOM PENH, 13 July 2009**

**DAM SITH'S APOLOGY IS EVIDENCE OF GOVERNMENT CAMPAIGN TO SILENCE THE  
OPPOSITION**

The Cambodian government has, in recent months, increasingly targeted members and supporters of the opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP). The recent news that Mr. Dam Sith, editor-in-chief of the pro SRP Moneaksekar Khmer newspaper, has written a letter of apology to the Prime Minister and offered to close the newspaper in return for the cessation of criminal charges against him, raises grave concerns. These actions come just two days after Mr. Kong Sam Onn, a lawyer who had been representing two SRP members of parliament, submitted an apology letter to the Prime Minister and joined the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) in order to have the law suit against him dismissed and to avoid being summons to a disciplinary hearing by the Cambodian Bar Association. The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) is profoundly disturbed by the implications of these latest events and the threats they pose to democracy in Cambodia.

Although there are currently five political parties represented in the National Assembly, the CPP has been the ruling party since 1998 and the SRP is the only opposition party to hold a substantial number of seats in the government. The parties represented in the 123 seat National Assembly are: the CPP with 90 seats; the SRP with 26 seats; the Human Rights Party (HRP) with 3 seats; the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia Party (FUNCINPEC) with 2 seats; and the Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP) with 2 seats.

The actions of the government in the past few months indicates that it is directly and systematically trying to dissolve the main opposition party by filing unfounded criminal lawsuits against its leaders or forcing its members and supporters to join the CPP. In April and June, editors of two other pro-SRP newspapers, the Serei Pheap Thmei and the Khmer Mchas Sork respectively, were charged with defamation and disinformation, the editor of the latter publication, Mr. Hang Chakra, was convicted of disinformation and sentenced to one year imprisonment and a fine. SRP parliamentarians Mrs. Mu Sochua and Mr. Ho Vann had their parliamentary immunity lifted by the National Assembly on 22 June so they could face defamation charges. Sam Rainsy himself was accused of defamation earlier this year. These actions clearly suggest an active campaign on the part of the Government to curtail the actions of the Sam Rainsy Party and to silence the opposition.

On 7 July 2009, Mr. Dam received a summons to appear in court to answer charges of defamation, disinformation and incitement. In his apology letter released last week, Mr. Dam explained his concession to the government on the grounds that he has "nothing else

to depend on to escape the court charges against me". Mr. Dam has been sued by the government twice before: once in 2006 and another time in 2008. The latter incident led to pre-trial detention. Both incidents were also related to his professional work at the Moneaksekar Khmer newspaper.

The CCHR echoes the fears published in the Khmer Sthapana and Deum Ampil that Mr. Dam, as a well-known critic of the CPP, will be pressured to follow Mr. Kong in joining the ruling party. We strongly urge the Government to stop these unfounded attacks on against opposition leaders, members and supporters. Cambodia needs active opposition parties to provide a stable, multi-party democracy. The CCHR fears that this campaign is evidence of a policy aimed at creating a one-party system in Cambodia thereby ending democracy in the kingdom and seriously eroding the rights and freedoms of Khmer citizens.

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