

Training on Human Rights-Based Approach in Journalism

Khmer Surin Restaurant, Phnom Penh

28 August 2012

8:15 – 9 a.m.

Opening Program Speech

James Heenan

OHCHR Cambodia Representative a.i.

Respects to His Excellency, **Thach Phen**, Secretary of State of the Ministry of Information, officials from the Ministry, Mr. Kimsuon Meas, director of the Media Training Center, media practitioners, ladies and gentlemen.

Good morning.

The UN Human Rights Office in Cambodia is very happy to partner with the Ministry of Information in organizing this training event which affirms both offices' high regard to the important contribution of the press and media in building a dynamic democracy.

The press has, as well all know, a very important role to play in society. A free and vibrant media, publishing without fear or favour is the proven way to build a fair and dynamic democracy. We can see many examples of this around the world. But no country is without its challenges, as we have seen recently with the

inquiry into phone tapping in Great Britain, a practice aimed solely at selling more newspapers.

The media is also a key player in promoting and respecting human rights, and this is what we are here today to discuss.

Human rights lie at the base of any democratic and just society. Without human rights, a society is just ruled arbitrarily by the most powerful. Human rights and the law restrain the powerful, to allow all in society to have a voice, even the weakest and most marginalised.

The press have two roles to play, and these we will explore during this training.

The first, **respect** human rights. This means refraining from interfering with the enjoyment of the rights of others. The press is not allowed to publish whatever it wants. It must respect the rights of others. We all know about laws protecting other people's reputations, so-called defamation laws. Cambodia made a great progress when – with the new penal code – no one can go to jail for defamation any more.

But there are other ways the press can infringe on people's rights.

- The press can promote discrimination against people or against groups. For example, in many countries, the press presents a negative picture of foreigners or people living with HIV. At its most extreme, this can lead to

vilification, meaning abusive or venomous language used to express blame or censure or bitter deep-seated ill will.

- The press can also undermine an individual's right to be presumed innocent by, for example, showing her or his photo and accusing them of a crime before they have been judged by a court.
- More generally, press articles have the potential to violate people's right to privacy and basic human dignity, for example photos of people in intimate moments or pain, shame or during the last minutes of their life. Early this year, we have read in newspapers or heard over TV and radio programs a statement from His Excellency, Minister Khieu Kanharith, calling the attention of the press and media to refrain from using indecent and horrible images of victims of rape and accidents. The reiteration of announcement in succeeding months only proves to show that the Ministry means business and calls for immediate action. We in the UN Human Rights Office are one with the Ministry in taking a stand on this.

I don't think these things need too much explanation. All we need to do is put ourselves (or our close family) in the situation of the individual and ask: how would I feel?

But the press also has a second human rights role, and that is in **promoting** human rights. You can help promote the enjoyment of rights of your fellow Cambodians. This is a much broader role.

- One is to battle discrimination by destroying stereotypes.
- Another is to help with human rights education but reporting specifically on human rights stories (maybe this training!). This can be helped if you use the language of rights because, as we will discuss, a rights-based approach is about entitlement, not charity. I must say that Cambodian media is one of the best in this regard. I have never seen so many newspaper and TV stories using the language of human rights.
- Another way is to work to highlight human rights violations, without fear or favour. This will not only promote better human rights compliance in the country, but make others more brave in speaking out about their stories.

There are many other ways the press can promote human rights, and I hope they will all be explored during this training.

So today's training aims to broaden human rights understanding by media practitioners so that information and news stories relayed to the public follow a human rights-based approach. The training organizers have come up with session topics that will cover a broad spectrum of human rights standards in journalism based on the international and Cambodian law. We hope that by the end of this training participants will have acquired adequate knowledge and understanding

of human rights to be able to deliver unbiased, objective and non-discriminatory reporting of news stories with human rights perspectives.

Journalists around the world are bound to adhere to certain ethics and standards in carrying out their profession. In Cambodia, media entities, press associations and networks have developed their respective journalism code of ethics for their members and staff. It would be appropriate to revisit the code of ethics every now and then to be reminded of one's professional responsibilities.

The UN Human Rights Office in Cambodia always stands ready to assist the Royal Government of Cambodia in fulfilling its obligations to the international community as a State Party to the UN international human rights treaties. Our office continues to enjoy an excellent level of technical cooperation with the Royal Government as we carry out our mandate translated into programs and activities jointly organized with key government offices, such as in providing legal and technical advice in the legislative and judicial reforms and building the capacity of government institutions.

On behalf of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Cambodia, I would like to thank you all for coming to the training and I wish you a productive learning experience.

###