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Feisty Newspapers Open Up Cambodia

By David Lamb

February 12, 1999 *in print edition A-5*

Eighteen months ago, the two feisty English-language newspapers that have introduced Cambodia to the perils and values of a free press faced a grim future. If the economy didn't do them in, the politicians almost certainly would.

The Cambodia Daily and the Phnom Penh Post—the only two American-owned independent papers in Southeast Asia—were born under the guardianship of the United Nations in the early '90s, when the world mounted a \$2-billion effort to turn this unstable, war-battered country into a democracy.

However, a coup in July 1997 shattered the economy—as well, apparently, as the illusion that Cambodia could be saved from itself. The tourist industry died, international aid withered, foreign investors went home.

Overnight, advertising linage all but disappeared. "We slashed to the bone to survive," said the Post's editor, Michael Hayes, a former Bostonian. On top of that, Hun Sen, the tough-guy coup leader who is also prime minister, was no friend to a free press, and many diplomats believed that closing the two papers would be high on his list of priorities.

As things turned out, the story may have a good-news ending. Buoyed by the fact that elections went ahead last year, ad linage is back up—though still about 25% below pre-1997 levels. Just as important, Hun Sen has become a born-again advocate of a free press. One reason: It's a good selling point in his attempt to attract foreign investors and international donors.

"There's no doubt many people with influence see us as having more potential to harm their interests than to benefit them," said Chris Decherd, the Daily's editor in chief. "At the same time, the same people rely on our coverage of events, and they can point to us and the Post and say to international donors: 'Look, we're making strides toward democracy. We've got a free press.'"

The six-times-a-week Daily (circulation 3,500) and the Post (4,000), which publishes twice a month, are far and away the top papers in Indochina, a region with no history of a free press. Both are solidly reported and unwaveringly objective, with the Daily noted for its spot coverage and the Post for its political analysis.

About 60 Khmer-language publications have sprung up in Cambodia since the hopeful days when the U.N. sent more than 20,000 troops to the country in what was then the world body's largest peacekeeping mission. Though far freer than papers in Vietnam or Laos, each of the publications is supported by a political interest group—a fact that is made abundantly clear by the reporting. The ruling Cambodian People's Party still controls, directly or indirectly, the nation's six Khmer-language television stations.

However, the Post and the Daily—which is published by former Newsweek correspondent Bernard Krisher, who lives in Japan—are, because of their accuracy and objectivity, Cambodia's papers of record, read here and overseas by diplomats, investors, journalists and those whose policies are shaping the country's future.

Alarm bells went off when Khieu Kanharith, Cambodia's secretary of state for information and press, recently suggested that the papers should be closed, adding that the government couldn't protect foreign journalists who wrote critically about Cambodia. U.S. Ambassador Kenneth M. Quinn expressed his concerns to Hun Sen, and the prime minister quickly reaffirmed his commitment to a free press.

Being a Cambodian journalist has always been risky. Since 1994, three editors, one reporter and a photographer have been killed, another editor has died under mysterious circumstances, and one newspaper office has been attacked with grenades. Foreign journalists—the Daily has seven expatriates on its staff, the Post four—have not been targeted, presumably because of the likely international repercussions.

"One of the most rewarding aspects of my job is working with Cambodian journalists and seeing them become real journalists who understand the importance of a free, balanced and objective press," said Jeff Smith, the Daily's national editor and a former business reporter for the Portland Press Herald in Maine.

His star Cambodian reporter, Roeun Van, 28, agreed.

"Most Cambodian journalists are still afraid to express ideas because of security," he said. "But it's important for Cambodians to know the truth and have access to accurate information, and that can only happen if our press is free."

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