

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH / ASIA

Formerly Asia Watch

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Rights Group Protests Cambodian Efforts To Silence Critics

Human Rights Watch/Asia today charged that the Cambodian government was attempting to silence critics by filing defamation suits against two French newspapers.

On January 11 and 12, 1995, the government pressed defamation charges against *Libération* and *Le Figaro* for articles each had published reporting abuses by the Cambodian military, among them cannibalism. These abuses were initially documented and confidentially reported by the United Nations Centre for Human Rights in Phnom Penh and have been the subject of ongoing investigations by various agencies of the Cambodian government itself. The first hearing in both cases will take place on February 13, 1995 in Paris.

The charges revolve around an investigation of murders, abduction, extortion, rape and torture allegedly committed by government military intelligence authorities in the embattled northwest provinces of Cambodia as recently as mid-1994. This division maintained secret detention sites for its victims in several locations, and in some cases soldiers reportedly cut out and ate the liver of those who were executed. Although the government's own Military Prosecutor corroborated much of the information in the U.N. Centre's report, Cambodia's two prime ministers established a "special commission" to investigate further. This commission concluded that there was no evidence of abuses during the present government's administration and has refused to take any action against the alleged perpetrators.

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Human Rights Watch is a not-for-profit corporation monitoring and promoting human rights in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Middle East, and among the signatories of the Helsinki accords.

"The abuse of legal process to silence reporting of serious human rights problems makes a mockery of freedom of speech," said Sidney Jones, Executive Director of the human rights monitoring group, known formerly as Asia Watch. "Instead of using defamation charges to stifle the reporting of human rights abuses, Cambodia could better vindicate its reputation by pressing criminal charges against the military perpetrators of these atrocities."

Jones noted that although the Cambodian government is seeking only a retraction and nominal damages, the suit is still a serious attempt to intimidate the foreign press. It follows the Cambodian government's action in banning two *Libération* journalists from the country on October 30, 1994. The Cambodian government has also ordered the suspension of numerous Cambodian newspapers that have published articles critical of government leaders and departments over the past year. Three Cambodian journalists were killed in 1994, each in circumstances that suggested a politically-motivated murder. Cambodia's National Assembly is due to take up this month a controversial draft press law that would criminalize defamation and "humiliation" of government figures and government bodies. King Sihanouk has called for all criminal penalties to be dropped from the law.

The reaction in Cambodia against critical foreign reporting follows a widely publicized case in Singapore, in which the government filed contempt of court charges against the *International Herald Tribune* for an article published in October 1994. In that article, an American academic, Christopher Lingle, suggested that some unspecified Asian countries used "a compliant judiciary" to bankrupt opposition politicians. On January 17, the Singapore High Court found the newspaper, its Asia editor and Lingle guilty. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's elder statesman, has also filed a civil suit for damages against newspaper executives and the article's author.

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Human Rights Watch/Asia (formerly Asia Watch)

Human Rights Watch is a nongovernmental organization established in 1978 to monitor and promote the observance of internationally recognized human rights in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Middle East and among the signatories of the Helsinki accords. Kenneth Roth is the executive director; Cynthia Brown is the program director; Holly J. Burkhalter is the advocacy director; Gara LaMarche is the associate director; Juan E. Mendez is general counsel; and Susan Osnos is the communications director. Robert L. Bernstein is the chair of the executive committee and Adrian W. DeWind is vice chair. Its Asia division was established in 1985 to monitor and promote the observance of internationally recognized human rights in Asia. Sidney Jones is the executive director; Mike Jendrzejczyk is the Washington director; Robin Munro is the Hong Kong director; Zunetta Liddell, Dinah PoKempner, Patricia Gossman and Jeannine Guthrie are research associates; Mark Girouard is a Luce fellow; Diana Cheng and Jennifer Hyman are associates; Mickey Spiegel is a research consultant.