‘Contradicting’ laws limit access

Sarah Taguiam and Pech Sotheary

Meas Sophorn, undersecretary of state at the Ministry of Information, speaks to attendees of a World Press Freedom Day event about access to information at the Cambodiana Hotel yesterday. Hong Menea

To ensure transparency in the Kingdom, NGOs and journalists urged the government yesterday at a World Press Freedom Day event to revise current contradicting legislation on information disclosure and include the media’s input in the drafting of the upcoming access to information law.

The proposed law, which has been in the works since 2007 and slated to be finalised within three years, was the focus of the event’s panel discussion.

Members of the law’s working group have received the first two tentative chapters of the legislation, which is expected to have nine. They have also sent in recommendations like using more precise language and re-categorising specific articles.

But while the proposed changes remain important, panelist and Advocacy and Policy Institute (API) director Neb Sinthay noted that a comprehensive review of 355 laws and 1,280 sub-decrees pertaining to access to information found that contradicting disclosure rules in Cambodia could lead to loopholes that would render the impending law ineffective.

“We found that there are a lot of complications in the laws, as some like the Code of Ethics for Civil Servants prohibit sharing information to the public and other sub-national laws that don’t,” Sinthay said.

“So we shouldn’t only be looking at adopting the access to information law, but also looking at
Panelist Ky Soklim, co-founder of news website Thmey Thmey, also suggested that journalists be allowed to participate in the new law’s creation.

“If they want to continue drafting this law, then the Ministry of Information should invite journalists in the discussion, because they are experiencing difficulties and it directly affects them,” Soklim said.

To give the media a chance to weigh in on the law, UNESCO Cambodia representative and working group co-chair Anne Lemaistre said that they are planning a forum for media professionals around July to August and starting public consultations around the Kingdom.

“We are still currently in the early stages but . . . it’s very important for us to try to incorporate their ideas to the law,” Lemaistre said.

“We are taking this seriously . . . as this legislation will give our citizens the real benefits of access to information in Cambodia,” added MoI under-secretary of state Meas Sophoan.

The next two chapters of the draft are due to be released during Thursday’s scheduled access to information working group meeting.