



United States Department of State
and the Broadcasting Board of Governors

Office of Inspector General

JAN 15 2013

MEMORANDUM

TO: IBB – Richard M. Lobo

FROM: OIG – Harold W. Geisel 

SUBJECT: Review of Broadcasting Board of Governors' Operations in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, ISP-IB-13-09

Executive Summary

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) team found no serious management issues at either the Voice of America (VOA) Khmer Service or the Radio Free Asia (RFA) operation in Cambodia. At the time of the inspection, both organizations were facing the possibility of legal sanctions on the part of the Royal Government of Cambodia, which had summoned representatives of VOA and RFA to complain about reporting that both organizations had produced.

Purpose and Scope

In connection with the OIG inspection of Embassy Phnom Penh, a two-person team consisting of public diplomacy and management inspectors reviewed Broadcasting Board of Governors' (BBG) operations in Cambodia, focusing on VOA and RFA news operations, neither of which has resident American staff. The inspection took place in Washington, DC, between September 10 and 14, 2012, and in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, between September 26 and October 13, 2012.

Cambodian Government Complaints

Most Cambodian media are either progovernment or reluctant to criticize the government due to intimidation. RFA and VOA reporting stands apart for dealing with issues that other media outlets do not address, including illegal land seizures, illegal logging, challenges to freedom of expression, and questions of democratic governance. While the inspectors were in Phnom Penh, the Royal Government of Cambodia summoned representatives of foreign broadcasters to a meeting to complain about their coverage. Although no clear outcome emerged from that meeting, the threat of legal sanctions against the broadcasters remained. In addition, the Royal Government of Cambodia announced a 20-year prison sentence for sedition for Mam Sonando, a local radio broadcaster station that carries VOA and RFA programming. Embassy Phnom Penh played an invaluable, low-key role throughout the period to support RFA and VOA while preserving VOA's journalistic independence and integrity.

Administrative Issues

At the time of the inspection, BBG was exploring the possibility of VOA and RFA staffs sharing office space and facilities in Phnom Penh. This option appears to be feasible. The VOA Khmer Service operates with modest infrastructure in rented office space, leased at a cost of approximately \$30,000 per year. Should the decision to combine offices go forward, BBG could realize annual savings by funding a single facility in Phnom Penh and staffing it with stringers and other support personnel. In addition, VOA staff reports that it has taken steps to regularize the payment of office expenses to segregate properly support costs from salary payments. The team did not review administrative support operations in detail during this review.

Security Issues

The memorandum of understanding between the Department of State and BBG with respect to security services explicitly exempts VOA correspondents from chief of mission authority. Particularly in an environment where harassment and violence directed against journalists is common, the embassy can play a role in advising on security practices. The team found that RFA and VOA staff members were closely engaged with embassy personnel in addressing the Mom Sonando issue and have developed constructive relationships with embassy personnel.

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