

CAMBODIA
 Crime

Two weeks before he and his 21-year-old son were shot dead, Cambodian journalist Khim Sambo reported on a not-uncommon topic in opposition-affiliated

newspapers. When gamblers from the upper echelons of the ruling Cambodia People's Party (CPP), accompanied by armed bodyguards or police, have prolonged losing streaks, it sometimes erupts in anger and even violence.

"When they lose, and cannot borrow more from the casino, they arrest the casino owners," he wrote under one of his numerous pseudonyms, Srey Ka, in the June 28-29 weekend edition of the daily *Khmer Conscience*, which is affiliated with the opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP).

However, Khim Sambo – whose own anger needed to be "toned down", according to a former colleague – went further than most, mocking the behaviour of a senior police officer described by many as "one of the most dangerous men in Cambodia".

He reported on an incident that allegedly occurred – SRP newspapers are often accused of fabrication or exaggeration – on June 25 at a casino complex at a border crossing with Vietnam in the town of Bavat in Svay Rieng province.

After losing his shirt at Le Macau Casino and Hotel, the officer borrowed from the casino, lost that, borrowed more – and lost again. When the casino manager refused to lend any more, he had him arrested by the junior officers accompanying him, Khim Sambo reported.

He went further, describing how the officer stacked the deck: "When he loses US\$100,000, the casino returns US\$50,000. But he plays until losing the returned money, and demands to borrow more. If any casino owner dares to say 'no', he threatens to arrest him."

Khim Sambo did not identify the officer by name but dropped enough hints so that when he concluded his report by stating "there is no need to name [the CPP gamblers] because everyone in Cambodia knows who they are", he assumed readers would be able to identify the officer, a source said.

"He did not think he had put himself in danger because he did not identify the officer by name," the source said on condition of anonymity. Several others – all of whom requested anonymity, citing concern for personal security – said that Khim Sambo was writing about Cambodian National Police Commissioner Hok Lundy.

The former governor of Svay Rieng province has been at the top of Cambodia's police force since 1994. "There is hardly anyone in Cambodia who has shown more contempt for the rule of law than Hok Lundy," Human Rights Watch has said. He "represents the absolute worst Cambodia has to offer", it said.

"We believe the killing is related to that article," Son Chhay, the whip of the opposition Sam Rainsy Party claimed, though he declined to identify the subject of the article.

The editor of *Khmer Conscience*, Dam Sith, who had been jailed on defamation charges in June, said he knew nothing about the article when interviewed by phone last Thursday.

That day, he was interviewed by one of the two agents from America's FBI, said to be



A woman prays in front of a portrait of journalist Khim Sambo, who was murdered along with his son in a Phnom Penh street on July 11. Police, who are being aided by the FBI, say they have no suspects in the case. Photo: AFP

In cold blood

The circumstances surrounding journalist Khim Sambo's murder point to official involvement, writes **Vincent MacIsaac**

"supporting" their Cambodian counterparts in the investigation.

"I told them I don't know anything about who is behind the killing, and that I hope they find who it is," he said.

Chan Soveth, a programme officer at the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association, warned that "if the FBI cannot work independently [their assistance] is just a political game".

He arrived at the scene of the double homicide about 30 minutes after it occurred at about 6.30pm on July 11 and has been investigating ever since. He fears the police are protecting the perpetrators rather than trying to solve the crime.

Khim Sambo, 47, bled to death on the side of a busy street in central Phnom Penh, minutes after being shot twice in the back while riding a motorcycle driven by his son Khat Sarinpheata. The young man died the next day in a Phnom Penh

hospital, after being shot twice while cradling his dying father, said Chan Soveth.

The killers, two men on a motorbike who approached Khim Sambo and his son from behind, were probably hired assassins, he said, pointing out that they used a K-49 pistol with a silencer.

"They had no fear of being arrested. They weren't wearing helmets and made no attempt to disguise their identity. They acted like they were under protection," Chan Soveth said.

When he arrived at the scene, he was able to gather information from bystanders but, when he returned the following morning, no one would speak to him, he said. Silence permeates human rights groups in Cambodia. When asked who he thought was behind the killing, Chan Soveth declined to answer. "I want to continue living in Cambodia," he said.

He believes the murders were intended to create an atmosphere of fear ahead of the July general election, which the CPP won by a landslide. This view was widely promoted by Cambodian and international human rights groups who expressed outrage following the killing.

But SRP whip Son Chhay disputes that there was any link between the killings and the election. "It was not a political killing," he said. "There was no order from the top of the CPP," he said. "[Prime Minister] Hun Sen does not know who is behind the killings. If Hun Sen knew who was behind the killings, the FBI would not have been allowed to join the investigation."

He added: "The FBI has been allowed in because the CPP believes they will be unable to find evidence of government involvement," though he in no way suggests that the CPP has turned benevolent.

"Their behaviour, their totalitarian thinking is very much like the Khmer Rouge. Either you support the CPP or you are an enemy of the state. Killing opposition members is acceptable," he said.

Son Chhay and Chan Soveth said they feared that the FBI was likely to be used by the Cambodian police to provide a veneer of legitimacy to what the latter described as a "sham investigation".

Son Chhay noted: "They have this great ability to manipulate the international community and they will manipulate the FBI to make sure nothing happens [with the investigation]."

This is already happening, he said, pointing to a police statement

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Chan Soveth, of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association

published in the *Cambodia Daily* this month quoting Phnom Penh's police commissioner as saying that an "FBI official had agreed that the killings were motivated by someone seeking revenge against the journalist's son".

Senior police officers have suggested that the target of the killers was not Khim Sambo but his son.

In his initial report into the crime, Chan Soveth found no evidence that either the father or the son were involved in a personal dispute that could have led to their murders.

US embassy spokesman John Johnson said he was aware that some human rights investigators had accused the local police of a cover-up. Because the investigation was ongoing, he said, he could not comment on the details of the case.

The FBI agents were playing a "purely supportive" role in the investigation at the invitation of the interior ministry, he said. Besides two investigators, who arrived on September 14, a forensic artist had arrived last week to assist local police with a sketch of the assailants, he added.

One day after meeting the FBI agents, Phnom Penh deputy police chief Hy Prou, who is in charge of the investigation, said there were no

leads on a suspect and that the complexities of the case made investigating it difficult.

However, the fact that editor Dam Sith was interviewed for the first time after the FBI agents arrived could signal that the bureau is nudging the Cambodian police in a new direction – towards the articles Khim Sambo wrote before he was killed.

In an interview at his home last Saturday, Dam Sith said that one of the questions asked by the FBI agent, who was accompanied by a translator from the US embassy and two Cambodian officers, concerned the kind of articles Khim Sambo had written for him. He said he replied: "A lot of articles about different things."

Dam Sith is a father with three young children. Since Khim Sambo's killing he does not leave his home unless he has to. He looked like he had not slept in weeks and was in a highly nervous state.

In 2006, Hok Lundy was denied a US visa due to allegations that he was involved in drug and human trafficking. The following month, however, the FBI awarded him a medal for his efforts in fighting terrorism. In April last year, he was finally granted a US visa, to attend a counterterrorism workshop.