Lecture at NUOL addresses freedom of expression

EKAPHONE PHOUTHONESY

More than 160 law teachers, students and non-government workers on Friday learnt about perspectives on freedom of expression in Asia and Europe.

An open lecture on the issue was organised by the National University of Laos’s Faculty of Law and Political Science and the Asia-Europe Foundation.

Prof Kevin Boyle of the Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex in the UK and Prof Cherian George from Nanyang Technological University in Singapore delivered the lecture.

The speakers discussed the norms relating to freedom of expression and its permissible limitations, its relation to other rights as well as democracy and the rule of law, with a special focus on challenges to freedom of expression particularly with regard to the media.

They said countries in Asia and Europe were converging around the principle of freedom of expression, recognising not only its intrinsic value for realising everyone’s full human potential, but also its indispensable contribution to developing tolerant, prosperous and harmonious societies.

These countries have embraced education as essential to progress in the information societies and knowledge economies of the 21st century. They recognize freedom of expression, information and the media as necessary for consolidating democracy, enhancing citizen participation and achieving sustainable development, the speakers said.

Although Asia and Europe have concrete principles regarding freedom of expression, the two regions face a number of challenges in putting these principles into practice.

The speakers called for more work in translating principles into meaningful practice, saying effective implementation required the clarification of a number of key issues.

First, there is a common misconception that combating state censorship will produce a responsible media. However, responsibility should be promoted through independent systems of media accountability that do not rely on state action.

Second, the role of the state is too often cast in negative terms, such that freedom of expression is equated with simply the absence of repression.

In truth, the state has a vital positive role to play, in providing people with access to the media they need.

Third, freedom of expression debates often overlook the huge impact of non-state actors, such as media corporations and other powerful interest groups, in restricting or expanding the flow of information and ideas.

Fourth, the argument for freedom of expression is too quickly framed in zero-sum terms, implying painful trade-offs with other aspects of development, and denying the powerful contribution that communication plays in development.

Germany continues support for MRC

VIENATIAN TIMES

During the 15th Council Meeting of the Mekong River Commission on Friday, Germany pledged to continue supporting the Mekong River Commission.

The signing of the Mekong Declaration on Commitments in Technical Cooperation is seen as a major milestone in the process of facilitating collaboration and cooperation among the riparian states.

Mr Andreas Schoeller, Federal Minister of the Environment, spoke about the importance of the Mekong River in regional development and the need for sustained international support.