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PM says government respects Duch verdict **Cheang Sokha** **August 5, 2010**

Prime Minister Hun Sen weighed in publicly for the first time yesterday on last week's landmark verdict at the Khmer Rouge tribunal.

Speaking at a graduation ceremony in Phnom Penh, Hun Sen rebutted critics' claims that he has sought to influence the tribunal, saying the government "respects the independence of the court".

"The government respects the decision made by the court, because the court is independent," Hun Sen said to an audience of several thousand students and officials.

"I respect the verdict handed down by the court. The government has no right to interfere or put any pressure on the court," he added.

Last week, the Khmer Rouge tribunal handed down its first verdict, finding former Tuol Sleng prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, guilty of crimes against humanity and grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions. The court sentenced Duch to 30 years in prison, though with credit for time already spent in detention, he will only serve roughly 19 more years.

Hun Sen was travelling in Singapore at the time of the judgment and had not addressed it before yesterday. In the past, the prime minister has publicly expressed his opposition to the court's pending investigations in its third and fourth cases, warning last year that they could provoke civil war. The government has also stood by six senior officials, including Minister of Foreign Affairs Hor Namhong and Minister of Finance Keat Chhon, who have ignored summonses to appear as witnesses as part of the investigation in the court's second case.

Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, said that although last week's verdict marked a historic day for the Kingdom, the looming trial of senior Khmer Rouge leaders in the court's second case would likely generate more notice from the government.

“Duch is not the big fish,” he said. “Case 002 is the most political, the most important and the most difficult, and you’re going to see a reaction then.”

Tribunal officials offered no public reaction to the premier’s comments yesterday.

“As a matter of principle, the court does not make comments to any reactions to the verdict,” United Nations court spokesman Lars Olsen said. “The verdict stands on its own merit.”

Hor Namhong last week called the sentence “light” and “inappropriate”, but said that he was only expressing a personal view and was not speaking on behalf of the government.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY JAMES O’TOOLE