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Khmer Rouge Suspect's Rights at Risk: Amnesty June 14, 2012

A refusal by Cambodia's UN-backed court to appoint a defence lawyer in a politically sensitive new Khmer Rouge case has "severely compromised" the suspect's rights, Amnesty International has said.

The London-based rights group urged the United Nations to probe allegations that court administrators had interfered with justice by blocking the appointment of the unnamed suspect's preferred defence lawyer Richard Rogers.

"Amnesty International is concerned that the rights of a suspect... to instruct lawyers of his choosing and conduct an effective defence, have been severely compromised," it said in a statement released late Wednesday.

The suspect is yet to be charged but, along with four other mid-level Khmer Rouge members, faces allegations of crimes against humanity and war crimes for his role in the 1975-1979 regime blamed for the deaths of up to two million people.

British lawyer Rogers, who used to work in the court's defence section, has denied accusations that there could be a conflict of interest if he joined the suspect's legal team after his administrative role.

It is the latest controversy to beset the tribunal, which is frequently accused of bowing to political pressure to bury the cases.

Criticism is usually aimed at local officials and staff at the court, but Amnesty said the UN "may leave itself open to a charge of double standards" if it fails to appoint Rogers while frequently accusing the Cambodian government of interference.

Anne Heindel, a legal advisor to the Documentation Centre of Cambodia which researches Khmer Rouge atrocities, voiced concern over the tribunal's latest controversy.

"Rogers is qualified and his client wants him. They (court staff) don't have the authority to question that," she said.

Khmer Rouge oversaw one of the worst horrors of the 20th century, wiping out nearly a quarter of the population through starvation, overwork and execution in a bid to forge a communist utopia.

The Cambodian government counts many former cadres among its ranks and does not want the court to go beyond its current trial of three ex-regime leaders, claiming further prosecutions could destabilise the country.