

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Canadian lawyer quits Khmer Rouge tribunals in 'frustration'

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Three years after he flew to Cambodia to prosecute the masterminds of the killing fields, a Canadian lawyer is quitting amid praise for his role in one of the most challenging tribunals in the world and questions about the impact of his departure.

Citing "personal and family reasons," Robert Petit announced his resignation as co-prosecutor at the Khmer Rouge trials that began in March in Cambodia.

A friend, law professor William Schabas, said Mr. Petit wasn't walking out in protest but would have nonetheless left with frustration at the problems faced by the tribunal.

But Prof. Schabas said Mr. Petit deserves credit for getting the prosecution started despite delays, lack of funds and interference from the government of Prime Minister Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge soldier.

"Robert was in the middle of it. He was in many ways the key person pushing this thing forward," he said. "I am sure he is returning with great frustration about what he's done. ... It's a perfectly understandable thing. He's worked hard enough and he's done his job."

Prof. Schabas said that, thanks to the growing number of international trials dealing with crimes in the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda, there is a body of experienced lawyers who could replace Mr. Petit.

Still, Mr. Petit's leaves as only one defendant is on trial before the tribunal in Phnom Penh, a hybrid court set up by Cambodia and the United Nations.

The next case involves four accused and its length and complexity underscore the need for a strong prosecution, said an observer who praised Mr. Petit's contribution.

"There is a concern that with his departure, and the expected transition in the prosecution team, there is a need for strong leadership," said James Goldston, executive director of the New York-based Open Society Justice Initiative.

Mr. Petit is to return to Ottawa to work for the Justice Department's war-crimes unit.

Mr. Petit has been involved in trials dealing with crimes in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Kosovo and East Timor.

In a statement yesterday, Mr. Petit said he would leave his job in September. "Cambodia's hopes for a better future lie, in part, on true accountability for crimes. My staff and I have tried, within our jurisdiction, to contribute to that goal to the best of our abilities."

The first case started this spring against Kaing Guek Eav, the warden at Tuol Sleng prison, where 14,000 were tortured and killed.