



Clinton urges rights progress in Cambodia **November 1, 2010**

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on Monday urged Cambodia to confront its troubled past by ensuring the Khmer Rouge are brought to justice for crimes against humanity in the 1970s and improve its current human rights record.

In the capital of Phnom Penh, she visited a former school that served as the main Khmer Rouge prison and torture center and appealed for the Cambodian people and government to overcome a legacy of impunity for abuses. The government has refused to allow a U.N.-backed court trying top Khmer Rouge leaders to prosecute lower-ranking members.

In addition, Clinton said she was prepared to work with Cambodia to resolve another historical hangover: an outstanding debt of about \$445 million in Vietnam War-era debt that it owes to the United States. The U.S. has balked at requests to forgive the debt from the Cambodian government, which says it cannot afford to pay.

Clinton toured the infamous S-21 prison where as many as 16,000 people were tortured by the Khmer Rouge before being executed for alleged counterrevolutionary behavior. The ultra-leftist regime is blamed for the deaths of some 1.7 million people from starvation, disease, overwork and execution during its 1975-79 reign.

"It's a very disturbing experience and the pictures — both the pictures of the young Cambodians who were killed and the young Cambodians who were doing the killing — were so painful," she told students after the tour. "But I also came away very impressed because a country that is able to confront its past is a country that can overcome it."

"Countries that are held prisoner to their past can never break those chains and build the kind of future that their children deserve," Clinton said. "Although I am well aware the work of the tribunal is painful, it is necessary to ensure a lasting peace."

The Khmer Rouge tribunal closed its first case in July when it convicted the regime's chief jailer and head of S-21, Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch. He was sentenced to 19 years in prison on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. A second trial is expected to start next year for the four top surviving Khmer Rouge leaders.

But Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has said the trials will stop there, despite U.N. wishes to bring lower-ranking officers to justice for murder, torture and other crimes. The U.N. says progress has been blocked by political interference from Cambodian officials who oppose more prosecutions.

Critics accuse the Cambodian leader of trying to limit the tribunal's scope to prevent his political allies from being indicted. Hun Sen once served as a Khmer Rouge officer and many of his main allies are also former members of the group.

In talks with Hun Sen later Monday after meeting the students, Clinton is expected to say that the U.S. wants to see the next trial proceed quickly and judiciously, according to U.S. officials.

Clinton also plans to tell Hun Sen that his government, which has been harshly criticized for cracking down on opposition groups, must do more to protect human rights. She will meet with opposition leaders before departing for Malaysia on the next leg of a two-week, seven-nation tour of the Asia-Pacific.

Last week, Hun Sen told visiting U.N. chief Ban Ki-moon that he must close down the U.N. human rights office in Cambodia, which he accuses of interfering in the country's internal affairs.

"We hope that democratic institutions become stronger in Cambodia and that the space for political expression is big and that people have the right to be critical of the government," Clinton told the students.

On repaying the outstanding loans, Clinton told the students she was ready to explore creative ways the country could make good on the arrears, possibly by agreeing to preserve key environmental areas or investing in education.

"There are things that the Cambodian government can do to demonstrate some level of accountability," she said. "It is hanging out there and it needs to be addressed."