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Clinton weighs in on human rights James O'Toole & Cheang Sokha November 1, 2010

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton weighed in today on the progress of the Khmer Rouge tribunal and the government's request that the United Nations close its human rights office in Cambodia. The remarks came just days after Prime Minister Hun Sen provoked a firestorm of controversy with comments on the two issues in a meeting with UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon.

The premier reportedly said last week that the tribunal would not be allowed to prosecute more than two cases, and requested that the UN close its local human rights office and remove its country director.

"I personally believe that the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is a valuable resource," Clinton said. "The High Commissioner's office is active in ways that we think are very complementary of what the Cambodian government is committed to doing, and we think the work is important."

Foreign Minister Hor Namhong said following Hun Sen's meeting with Ban last week that the premier had said the rights office would be closed if its long-time country director, Christophe Peschoux, was not removed. Information Minister Khieu Kanharith later said that the office would be closed regardless.

Hor Namhong backed away from these statements on Monday, however, saying that there was "no decision to close this office yet".

Clinton visited Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and later told students at a town hall meeting that she was "very proud to see firsthand the willingness of your country to face that past, bravely and honestly". Following her meeting with Hor Namhong, Clinton said she would be "personally reaching out" to donor countries to help close funding gaps at the Khmer Rouge tribunal.

The UN side of the hybrid tribunal is short roughly US\$30 million in funding for next year, and the Cambodian side faces a shortfall of \$9 million. Clinton said the court would require between \$46 million and \$50 million to stage a trial in its second case, in which indictments were handed down in September.

"My highest priority right now is to make sure that we have that money in place so that trial can begin," she said.

"It is scheduled to begin in the first half of 2011 – the sooner the better is my view."

Hun Sen told Ban last week that the court would be closed following Case 002, citing a threat to the Kingdom's stability posed by investigations in the court's third and fourth cases.

These comments provoked an outcry from local and international observers who said the government was interfering in the work of the court. Clinton, however, dodged questions regarding her views on Cases 003 and 004.

“There is ... concern on the part of the Cambodian government about going beyond [Case 002],” Clinton said.

“That is something that we in the international community should consult closely with the Cambodian government on, but the first piece of business is getting 002 to trial.”

Eang Sophalleth, assistant to Hun Sen, said following Clinton's meeting with the premier that she had “pressed Hun Sen for his respect of the independence of the Khmer Rouge tribunal, and ... promised Samdech Hun Sen that she would help to find more funding for the tribunal to try the other Khmer Rouge leaders.”

At a meeting with officials from the Sam Rainsy and Human Rights parties, Clinton urged the lawmakers to form a united opposition, HRP president Kem Sokha said. The SRP's Son Chhay said Clinton had encouraged the parties to form a comprehensive political platform with which to compete against the ruling Cambodian People's Party.

SRP spokesman Yim Sovann added that Clinton had pledged to “follow in detail” the case of party leader Sam Rainsy, who is living in exile after being sentenced in absentia to 12 years in prison on a series of charges stemming from a protest he staged last year against Vietnamese territorial encroachment.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY MEAS SOKCHEA AND THOMAS MILLER