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**UN envoys slam Cambodia over genocide judge's transfer**

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia: Two U.N. envoys accused the Cambodian government on Thursday of interfering with the judiciary by transferring a top judge from the Khmer Rouge genocide tribunal, which they said was a violation of the Constitution.

Yash Ghai, the U.N. secretary general's special representative for human rights in Cambodia, and Leandro Despouy, special rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, made their criticism in a joint statement.

They said the government's move to appoint You Bun Leng, one of two investigating judges at the U.N.-backed genocide tribunal, to head the Appeals Court is casting doubt on judicial independence in Cambodia.

Their criticism came amid mounting concern that You Bun Leng's transfer could also further delay efforts to convene the genocide trial. You Bun Leng has said he will not take up his new post right away to allow for a smooth transition.

The government has said that the new appointment is part of its agenda to reform the judiciary, and is separate from the tribunal.

The U.N. envoys agreed that reform is crucial for Cambodia.

"But it should not be undertaken at the expense of the essential protections ... that enable judges to administer, and be seen to administer, justice efficiently, impartially and fairly, free of political interference," they said.

They charged that the appointment violated the Cambodian Constitution, which states that all judicial appointments, transfers, promotions, suspensions or disciplinary actions are decided by the Supreme Council of Magistracy, the body that oversees conduct of judges.

But the council never met to decide on the appointment, which was approved instead by a royal decree. King Norodom Sihamoni signed the royal decree at the request of Prime Minister Hun Sen, the envoys said.

According to the U.N. officials, that meant that You Bun Leng's appointment "was done at the request of the executive branch of government in contravention of the separation of executive and judicial powers specified in the Constitution."

Chief government spokesman Khieu Kanharith could not be reached for comment.

The envoys' statement followed a recent appeal from the U.N. to the government to reconsider the judge's transfer, saying it could disrupt efforts to convene the long-awaited genocide trials.

After numerous delays, You Bun Leng and Marcel Lemonde, a U.N.-appointed judge, only recently began investigations of former Khmer Rouge leaders accused of crimes against humanity, genocide and other atrocities that resulted in the deaths of some 1.7 million people in the late 1970s.

The judges have so far indicted one of five suspects. Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, headed the former Khmer Rouge S-21 prison. The other four have not been publicly named and remain free in Cambodia.