



Khmer Rouge trial lawyer says politics interfere **November 10, 2010**

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) — Political interference by Cambodians threatens the independence of the Khmer Rouge tribunal, the head of the defense office said Wednesday.

Richard Rogers, the chief of the U.N.-backed tribunal's Defense Support Section, said in a statement he was leaving his post after four years and called attention to obstruction by Cambodian officials, an issue previously raised by other defense lawyers.

"The greatest challenge for the defense remains the threat of political interference that may undermine the independence of the court," Rogers said, noting the tribunal cannot meet international standards without an effective way to address fair trial concerns.

"It is never easy to represent persons accused of mass atrocities," Rogers said. "The size and complexity of these cases, as well as the political context, has made this task all the more difficult."

The tribunal closed its first case in July when it convicted the Khmer Rouge's chief jailer, 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.

Prime Minister Hun Sen has said the trials will stop there, despite wishes by prosecutors and the United Nations to try lower-ranking officers for murder, torture and other crimes.

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

Court officials have privately spoken about their frustration with having witnesses blocked from testifying and attempts to bring additional cases against ex-Khmer Rouge officials denied.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon discussed the problem of political interference at the tribunal during a visit to Cambodia last month.

Ban told The Associated Press he had emphasized to Prime Minister Hun Sen the need for the government to "provide full cooperation and fully respect the independence of the court."