



Leadership woes dismissed
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The international co-prosecutor at the Khmer Rouge tribunal said Wednesday that his forthcoming departure would not detract from the work of the prosecutors' office, dismissing as unfounded concerns raised by civil society groups that the office would suffer from an "absence of leadership".

Robert Petit announced Tuesday that he would leave the tribunal in September for personal reasons.

He said Wednesday that the office would have no trouble operating without him, noting that "a team of people working together" had been involved in gathering evidence and making legal and strategic decisions.

He said Deputy Co-Prosecutor William Smith was "now leading the case and will do so until further notice".

"Now, did that change of personnel modify one iota of the evidence in the case file? Did it have any influence in how well we're assisting the Trial Chamber? Of course not," he said.

Petit, who has worked at courts in Africa and Asia dating back to 1996, said personnel changes were "not foreign to international tribunals", adding that only the departure of a sitting judge could negatively affect an ongoing trial.

"The only thing that matters is that there is someone in each position who is lawfully empowered to make decisions and does just that," he said.

Long Panhavuth, a court monitor for the Cambodia Justice Initiative, described this remark as disingenuous.

"To me this is not true," he said in an interview. "We've had years of investigations before the trial, and now we have come to the trial stage where the prosecutor plays a very, very important role."

Concern over leadership

The Cambodia Justice Initiative was one of six groups to sign a joint statement issued Wednesday that expressed concern over Petit's departure, asserting it could create "an

absence of leadership in the prosecutor's office" that could detract from its work.

The statement also raised the concern that Petit's departure would leave unresolved the ongoing dispute between Petit and the Cambodian co-prosecutor, Chea Leang, over whether to try more suspects.

Petit filed a Statement of Disagreement in December 2008 saying that he and Chea Leang were at odds over whether to pursue more suspects, and Chea Leang later said doing so could threaten national stability.

Petit said it was not a factor in his decision to leave the tribunal, and that his departure would not affect any eventual resolution. "It's entirely in the hands of the Pre-Trial Chamber," Petit said.

Judges were expected to announce a decision on the issue in a June 5 hearing, however, they cancelled the hearing and a written decision is believed to be forthcoming.

He declined to elaborate on his reasons for leaving the court, saying, "I don't believe it's proper to air out one's personal life in the media, and I don't intend to do so".

UN court spokesman Lars Olsen said Monday that he expected a successor to be selected before Petit leaves on September 1.