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Legal Eagles, Officials Hail Tribunal's Legacy

Stuart White

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Hopeful projections for the future of Cambodia's courts butted heads with harsh realities as Khmer Rouge tribunal officials and legal professionals gathered to discuss the legacy of the tribunal, practically within earshot of the trial of jailed Beehive Radio director Mam Sonando.

Experts spoke of the lasting domestic impact of the tribunal, which has long been pointed to as a "model court" meant to offer an example to Cambodia's oft-maligned court system, but some saw a celebration of the court's legacy as premature, coinciding as it did with Sonando's trial, which rights groups have pointed to as an embodiment of local courts' shortcomings.

"There's already a lot of legacy created at the ECCC and there's a lot more to come in the years ahead," keynote speaker David Scheffer, the UN-appointed special expert to the tribunal, said, while noting that "as with all things in international justice, we have to be patient."

Others, however, drew a stark contrast between the ECCC's projected influence and the current state of the judicial system in Cambodia.

"I think there is a certain irony that as this legacy conference is happening, down the road there is a high-profile, politicised trial of someone we consider to be a prisoner of conscience," Amnesty International researcher Rupert Abbott said.

"The Cambodian justice system is apparently being used to persecute critics of the government."

ECCC acting director of administration Tony Kranh called attention to the potential human resources benefit of Cambodians who have cut their teeth at the tribunal cycling back into domestic practice.

"I hope the lawyers, judges and legal staff here will become a great asset to the Cambodian legal system's reform," he said in a speech following Scheffer's remarks.