



KRouge prosecutor denies row sparked resignation

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The international prosecutor at Cambodia's Khmer Rouge war crimes court denied Wednesday that his sudden resignation from the tribunal was due to a dispute with his local counterpart.

Canadian prosecutor Robert Petit insisted he was quitting for family reasons and hit out at "conspiracies" which suggested the real cause was a row with Cambodian co-prosecutor Chea Leang over whether to pursue more suspects.

The UN-backed court's long-awaited first trial has seen Kaing Guek Eav, better known by the alias Duch, accept responsibility for overseeing the execution of more than 15,000 people at the 1970s regime's main prison.

Asked whether his departure had anything to do with the disagreement with Chea Leang, Petit said he was resigning due to private personal family matters "totally unrelated" to his work at the court.

"Those conspiracies might indeed seem like an attractive angle for a story, but they wouldn't be the truth," Petit, who initially announced his resignation on Tuesday, told a press briefing at the court.

Four other Khmer Rouge leaders are also in detention awaiting trial by the court, but while Petit has sought to bring more cadres to justice Chea Leang has disagreed.

Lawyers for detained former Khmer Rouge ideologue Nuon Chea have alleged Petit has knowledge that his co-prosecutor was ordered by the Cambodian government not to pursue more former regime members.

The court has faced controversy over a series of government interference allegations and claims that Cambodian staff were forced to pay kickbacks for their jobs.

Petit indicated to reporters Wednesday that he thought the court must confront Cambodian government attempts to control the tribunal.

"I think it is very disturbing that anyone other than judicial officials -- be they elected officials or anyone else -- think they can legitimately tell any court what to do," Petit said.

"Of course, that goes to the very legitimacy of the process and must be addressed," he added.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has publicly stated he would rather the court failed than pursue other former cadres, warning further prosecutions would plunge the country back into civil war.

Critics have accused the administration of trying to protect former cadres who are now in government.

Petit told reporters his departure was an "inconsequential topic" for the court since the prosecution was always a "team effort".

Cambodian civil society groups, however, issued on Wednesday a statement that they were "disturbed" by his departure at a time when his office needs to "establish its leadership role in the trial and the court."

Proceedings focused Wednesday on operations at S-24, a "re-education centre" which former Duch also oversaw as part of his responsibilities in addition to his main job as head of the regime's main Tuol Sleng prison, or S-21.

Duch told judges it was possible that some of his staff at S-24 interrogated prisoners without his knowledge, but denied reports his subordinates flayed skin of inmates through torture by electric shock.

"Electrocution was a separate matter. I do not believe that there were such incidents there, because there were limited generators," Duch said.

The tribunal was created in 2006 to try leading members of the 1975-1979 regime, which killed up to two million people as it emptied Cambodia's cities and enslaved the population on collective farms.