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Co-Prosecutor of UN-backed tribunal trying Khmer Rouge leaders steps down

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The international Co-Prosecutor of the United Nations-backed tribunal in Cambodia trying Khmer Rouge leaders accused of mass killings and other crimes three decades ago announced his resignation today.

In a statement, Robert Petit said he would be stepping down as of 1 September for personal and family reasons.

“It has been the greatest privilege of my career to have the opportunity to bring some justice to the victims of the crimes of the Khmer Rouge,” he said. “I remain convinced that Cambodia’s hopes for a better future lie, in part, on true accountability for crimes.” Mr. Petit said that the search for his successor will likely wrap up soon.

The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), set up in 2003 under an agreement between the UN and Cambodia, is tasked with trying senior leaders and those most responsible for serious violations of Cambodian and international law committed during the Khmer Rouge rule.

The tribunal is staffed by a mixture of Cambodian and international employees and judges, and there are two prosecutors: Mr. Petit, who is leaving his post as International Co-Prosecutor, and Chea Leang, who is Cambodian.

Estimates vary, but as many as two million people are thought to have died during the rule of the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979, which was then followed by a protracted period of civil war in the impoverished South-East Asian country.

Currently, two cases are before the court. The trial of Kaing Guek Eav, also known as “Duch,” got underway in March, when he was charged by the ECCC in Phnom Penh with crimes including torture and premeditated murder while he was in charge of the renowned S-21 detention camp, while Nuon Chea faces charges of having planned and ordered the murder, torture and enslavement of civilians.

In April, a senior UN legal official underscored the need to address allegations of corruption surrounding the ECCC.

Assistant-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs Peter Taksoe-Jensen has submitted a provisional ethics monitoring mechanism to Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Sok An for his consideration.

In a statement to the press, he stressed that for an ethics monitoring system at the ECCC to be credible, the staff should have the freedom to approach the Ethics Monitor of their own choice and put forward complaints without fear of retaliation.

“The United Nations will further strengthen its own anti-corruption mechanism within the Court,” added Mr. Taksoe-Jensen.