



Rights groups urge UN action over KRouge court October 11, 2011

Rights groups urged the United Nations Tuesday to seek assurances from Cambodia that it will not meddle in a UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal after a judge resigned citing political interference.

Amnesty International said the UN could not sit idly by after Siegfried Blunk openly acknowledged the problem when announcing his decision to step down on Monday. Blunk said government opposition to further prosecutions linked to the 1975-79 regime effectively made his position untenable.

"The UN should seek guarantees from the Cambodian government that it will not interfere in its proceedings and make clear that any attempts to influence the work of the (court) will force the UN to review its involvement," said Sam Zarifi, the group's Asia-Pacific director.

The departure of Blunk, one of two judges tasked with investigating new Khmer Rouge cases, is the latest setback to the court, long dogged by allegations of political interference.

Human Rights Watch, which had been highly critical of Blunk's work and last week called for his resignation, said the UN should "conduct a full investigation" into allegations of "pervasive political interference" at the court.

"Blunk's statement is a challenge to the UN... to insist that the Cambodian government end its interference in the work of the (court) and allow it to work independently," the group's Asia director Brad Adams told AFP.

The court, made up of Cambodian and international legal officials, was set up in 2006 to provide some justice for the traumatised nation for the deaths of up to two million people under the communist movement's reign of terror.

It has cost more than \$100 million so far but has completed just one trial -- jailing Kaing Guek Eav, a former Khmer Rouge prison chief, last year for 30 years for overseeing the deaths of 15,000 people.

A second trial involving the regime's four most senior surviving leaders is under way and expected to start hearing testimony before the end of the year.

Two more possible cases against five ex-Khmer Rouge members are officially still under consideration but critics said German judge Blunk and his Cambodian counterpart were failing to investigate them fully in the face of government objections.

Prime Minister Hun Sen -- himself a former cadre -- has repeatedly made it clear he wants the court's work to end with the second trial, even saying that further cases were "not allowed".

But Foreign Minister Hor Namhong on Tuesday denied the government was seeking to control the court.

"We clearly know that the investigation into cases three and four is the right of the court," he told reporters in Phnom Penh.

The Khmer Rouge was responsible for one of the worst horrors of the 20th century, wiping out nearly a quarter of Cambodia's population through starvation, overwork and execution in a bid to forge a communist utopia.