



New Funding for Cambodia War Crimes Tribunal

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Prime minister John Key failed to raise Cambodia's appalling human rights with counterpart Hun Sen - but is set to announce a cash boost to its war crimes tribunal today. Phnom Penh wanted abuses such as forced evictions, politically motivated convictions and a corrupt electoral system swept under the carpet as it hosted Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) conference and the East Asia Summit this week.

On Monday, in a tense closed door meeting US President Barack Obama urged Hun Sen to release political prisoners and hold fair elections. The ASEAN also adopted a human rights declaration on Monday.

Ahead of the East Asia Summit (EAS) Key said he had grave concerns about the lack of democratic freedoms in Cambodia and would take the prime minister to task.

But he didn't get the chance during the whirlwind two-day visit. He insisted no-one is shying away from the subject - but it didn't come up at the meeting of 16 national leaders yesterday.

The relationship with Cambodia "wouldn't be the strongest one," he admitted. "We generally do raise those issues and we are not afraid of doing it."

He added: "They are genuine issues and no-one is arguing it is perfection here. They are improving and they are making positive steps, but they've got quite a long way to go...They are the host of the East Asian Summit and so it is really the ...regional issues [under discussion] rather than home in on any local specific issue."

Key said he used his intervention - or speech - to talk about global economic challenges. "You are trying to use that time to really push what us the single most important issues...I really use mine around the economic issues, and a bit around disaster management ...and what we would like to see happen in the South China Seas."

Cambodia is known for its Khmer Rouge "killing fields," urban death camps and the genocide of two million people under the brutal Pol Pot regime in the 1970s. Hun Sen was a former Khmer Rouge battalion commander who defected to the resistance.

In the last ten years, strong economic growth has seen violent land grabs - with critics attacked or imprisoned.

Today Key will visit the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, where the international community and local authorities have worked since 2007 to bring the living Khmer Rouge leaders to justice.

He'll talk with Dame Sylvia Cartwright - however media interviews with the former Governor General are off limits.

She works alongside judges from Australia, France and Austria, but her role has been controversial. Defence lawyers have twice called for her to be disqualified because she held informal meetings with prosecutors.

During the visit he is to announce a funding boost - adding to an extra \$100,000 pledged by Foreign Minister Murray McCully in March which took New Zealand's contribution to \$1 million.

In August it was reported the war crimes tribunal was near collapse because it was running out of cash. The Euro-zone crisis, Japan's earthquake and shrinking global budgets saw contributions drying up and it needed US\$92m (NZ\$113m) for 2012/13 running costs.

"The process is really important and we are going to show solidarity to Dame Sylvia Cartwright for the work that she has been doing," Key said.

The work of the tribunal is "hugely significant" for Cambodia. "It's a very challenging issue for them, they are working their way through it. They've had some success but they have a lot further to go."

Key will then fly from Phnom Penh to Yangon - for the first visit of a New Zealand to Myanmar. He is following in the footsteps of Obama, who was there on Monday - making global headlines as the first US president to embrace the troubled nation.

Key will meet with President Thein Sein and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to support the move to democracy in the country which spent decades under oppressive military rule.

THE KHMER ROUGE TRIBUNAL

Almost a quarter of the Cambodia population was wiped out by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979.

As well as the notorious 'killing fields' - there was a forced evacuation of the capital and thousands starved and died in death camps. The intelligentsia and monks were targeted. City residents were forced into the swamp-like countryside to slave in its paddy fields. Around 90,000 out of a population of around 14 million have so far visited the courts to watch trials unfold.

Three men and one woman have been brought to trial - all in their 80s.

Pol Pot's right hand man Nuon Chea; prison camp and security leader Kang Kek Iew - known as Comrade Duch; and Khieu Samphan, Pol Pot's successor.

Deputy prime minister Ieng Sary and his wife were also prosecuted. But the UN-backed tribunal created international outrage by allowing Ieng Thirith - the sister in law of Pol Pot - to walk free, declaring her mentally unfit.

The chubby-faced revolutionary leader died in 1998 and was never brought to justice. Kiwi rower Rob Hamill, whose brother Kerry was murdered by the Khmer Rouge in 1978, has testified before the tribunal.