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Talks Set Over Cash-Strapped Tribunal

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Officials from Cambodia's Khmer Rouge tribunal, which has run out of money to pay salaries of workers, will meet with donor countries at the United Nations in New York next week on urgent funding needs, a spokesman for the U.N.-backed war crime court said Wednesday.

“We hope that after the meeting, there will be promises, with funding to the court from donors,” spokesman Neth Pheaktra told RFA. “They will have a meeting to request for the court’s funding for the national [Cambodian] and international side,” he said.

More than 300 Cambodians working at the tribunal have not received their salaries since October 2011, with a handful of staff having left temporarily in search for jobs, he said.

“The national side of the court is facing a funding shortage to pay wages including staff, judges and prosecutors. We have seen that within these few days, six staff working at the prosecution department have [left temporarily] to find other substitute employment to support their families,” Neth Pheaktra said.

Voluntary contributions

International staff at the tribunal are paid by the U.N. and are not affected by the freeze in salary payments. Salaries of local staff are however funded by voluntary contributions from donor countries such as Japan, France, and Australia.

“The meeting is our big hope for the national side. We hope that donors will contribute funding to the national side to avoid any funding difficulties,” he said.

This is the fourth time the Cambodian side is faced with a funding crisis since 2009.

Neth Pheaktra could not say how much funds the tribunal is seeking from donors for the court's 2012-2013 budget.

“The total budget amount is still confidential but it has been sent to the donors already,” he said.

He noted that between 2006 to 2011, the court spent about U.S. \$140 million -- \$33 million from the Cambodian side and \$107 million from the international side.

Brutal rule

The tribunal, officially known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), was set up six years ago to seek justice for the deaths of up to two million Cambodians during the brutal rule of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979.

It has long been hit by allegations of political meddling.

In the latest dispute, the United Nations has accused the Cambodian government of violating an agreement that established the tribunal by refusing to appoint a Swiss jurist as a co-investigating judge.

Prime Minister Hun Sen has openly opposed expanding the trials by adding indictments of other former Khmer Rouge figures, some of whom have become his political allies.

The tribunal completed its first trial this month, jailing former Khmer Rouge prison chief Duch for life on appeal for overseeing the deaths of some 15,000 people.

A second trial involving three senior regime leaders is ongoing but the landmark proceedings risk being overshadowed by the current controversy over the Swiss judge.

The court's third and fourth cases are hanging in the balance amid the tussle over the Swiss judge.