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**A Cambodian Court
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The Khmer Rouge war-crimes tribunal and the fight against corruption

Today marks the opening of the first trial of the Khmer Rouge war crimes tribunal in Phnom Penh. The tribunal was created to help the country come to terms with its brutal past; taking the stand today will be the man known as Duch, who ran one of the Khmer Rouge's most infamous gulags. For another indication of how this country is moving on - or not -- look not to the witness stand, but to the way that the court handles its most difficult challenge: corruption.

Corruption is widespread in Cambodia, which ranks 166th of 180 countries on Transparency International's index of corruption perceptions, as it is in many countries that lack a strong rule of law. The war-crimes tribunal seems to be no exception to this culture: Allegations of kickbacks were first raised by NGOs more than two years ago, and a United Nations Development Program report in 2007 found serious irregularities in hiring and salary practices.

The U.N. conducted a review of the kickback allegations and submitted its findings to the Cambodian government last fall -- but never released them to the public. We'll never know whether an earlier, more aggressive and more transparent review could have already cleared the court's name.

Meanwhile, charges of political interference at the court have mounted after a key Cambodian prosecutor refused to bring charges against more defendants -- in addition to the five already being tried. The prosecutor in question is the niece of Deputy Prime Minister Sok An, whose responsibilities include the tribunal.

These irregularities are having consequences. The defense lawyers for defendant Nuon Chea filed a case in the Phnom Penh Municipal court, which is independent of the tribunal, arguing that their client could not have a fair trial at the tribunal if kickbacks were being paid. Their case was dismissed after a cursory investigation. But the very existence of such a case raised questions about the court's credibility.

The United Nations bears primary responsibility for clearing up these clouds, although that's not an easy task. Under the tribunal's awkward "hybrid" structure, the U.N. and the Cambodian government share responsibility for running the court, but neither side has much power to hold the other accountable for ethical lapses.

The tribunal's defenders point out that the legal proceedings are going smoothly, and that the administrative kinks that dogged the court's early days have largely been worked out.

Fair enough. But for the court to be credible, the U.N. needs to release its findings.

The tribunal may help heal old wounds. But for the court to make a contribution to Cambodia's future, it can do more than deliver a verdict: It can set an example. Cambodia's justice system could use one.