



Australia in controversy over Khmer Rouge trials

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Australia is mixed up in a controversy surrounding the credibility of the Cambodian tribunal hearing the trials of former Khmer Rouge officials.

Allegations that Cambodian court employees paid kickbacks to senior staff of the hearings in return for their jobs have simmered for some time.

Most international donors have declined to release more funds to the tribunal until the Cambodian government resolves the issue.

But Australia has bucked the trend, announcing earlier in April that it would release funds.

Heather Ryan, a trial monitor for the Open Society Justice Initiative, told Radio Australia's Connect Asia program it was "inexplicable" that the Australian Government would take such a step.

She said the move undermined the negotiating position of the United Nations and others committed to trying to eliminate or reduce corruption in the court and in Cambodia in general.

The Australian embassy in Phnom Penh refused to comment, saying the matter was too sensitive.

But a spokesman for the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra said the decision was based on what he called "broad progress" in the Cambodian government's efforts to address corruption concerns, and to ensure the court could continue its work.

At present, the court is hearing the case of Comrade Duch (Kaing Guek Eav), the former commander of the notorious Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, who is charged with crimes against humanity.

The Foreign Affairs Department says Australia consulted with other donors and the UN before making its decision.

Funds blocked

But the UN Development Program (UNDP) - which holds the money in trust - has refused Australia's request to release the funds.

"We are the ones accountable for the proper use of what at the end of the day is taxpayers' money," UNDP country manager Jo Scheuer said.

"We have said for the last nine months that we need to see allegations resolved and mechanisms put up before we can resume our role, and that today is still the same position."

Lawyers for some of the defendants have used the corruption issue to argue their clients will not get a fair trial.

There have been some media allegations that Cambodian judges paid kickbacks to get their positions - a potentially fatal flaw for the tribunal.

Mr Scheuer says the UNDP has seen no evidence that happened.

"From the work we have done with the court we have no information whatsoever that anything happened on the judicial side of the national side of the court," he said.