



Cambodian PM denies interfering with KRouge court December 3, 2009

PHNOM PENH — Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen on Thursday denied interfering with the UN-backed Khmer Rouge court, but repeated warnings that pursuing more suspects from the 1970s regime could spark civil war.

"I am not interfering with the court. But it is not the court that stopped the war. Be careful -- the court will create war, causing division of society again," Hun Sen said in a speech in the capital Phnom Penh.

The premier made his remarks days after lawyers for a former Khmer Rouge leader demanded that investigators at the war crimes tribunal question Hun Sen and government officials over alleged interference.

"Again and again, I see they want to question (more people). Be careful, this is the issue of death," Hun Sen said during a ceremony to mark the international day of disabled people.

Hun Sen went on to repeat warnings that he would rather see the court fail than expand prosecutions beyond the five former Khmer Rouge leaders currently detained for their roles in the regime which killed up to two million people. Final arguments in the court's first trial, of prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, concluded last week.

The court plans to prosecute former Khmer Rouge ideologue Nuon Chea, head of state Khieu Samphan, foreign minister Ieng Sary and his wife, minister of social affairs Ieng Thirith sometime in 2011.

"Let's try these few senior leaders," the premier said.

"No more, I am sorry. I tell you that I would prefer the court to fail. But I will not let war happen. If it fails, let it fail."

He went on to blast foreign nations for not "daring to talk about the prosecution of the Khmer Rouge" when they were still a strong communist movement.

The tribunal was created in 2006 to try leading Khmer Rouge members, and is holding five former leaders on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. It has not yet ruled whether to prosecute additional suspects.

The process has often been hit by allegations that Hun Sen's administration has attempted to interfere in the tribunal to protect former regime members who are now in government.

The Khmer Rouge were ousted by Vietnamese-led forces in 1979 after nearly four years of iron-fisted rule, but continued to fight a civil war until 1998. Hun Sen was a former Khmer Rouge guerilla who defected in 1977.