



Corruption charges overshadow Khmer Rouge trial

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) - Cambodia's genocide tribunal reopens its historic trial of an accused Khmer Rouge torture chief on Monday, but allegations of corruption threaten to overshadow the proceedings.

The U.N. Assistant Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, Peter Taksoe-Jensen, is visiting Cambodia to meet with government and tribunal officials about allegations that Cambodian personnel taking part in the U.N.-backed tribunal were forced to pay kickbacks to obtain their positions.

Defense lawyers and human rights groups suggest that the allegations, if unanswered, could sink the tribunal's credibility. They also pose a financial threat, since foreign aid donors who provide the budget for Cambodian personnel are withholding their funds pending a resolution of the issue.

Last week, the tribunal began trying Kaing Guek Eav, 66, who was commander of Phnom Penh's S-21 prison also known as Tuol Sleng when the communist group held power from 1975-79.

As many as 16,000 men, women and children are believed to have been tortured there before being sent to their deaths.

Kaing Guek Eav, better known by his nom de guerre Duch, is the first senior Khmer Rouge figure to face trial, accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as homicide and torture.

Four more senior leaders of the group are also in custody and expected to be tried sometime over the next year. An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died from forced labor, starvation, medical neglect and executions under the Khmer Rouge.

In a dramatic opening personal statement to the court, Duch took responsibility for his actions and delivered a public apology for horrific activities detailed in the indictment against him read out earlier.

The corruption allegations, which were originally leveled two years ago by the Open Society Justice Initiative, a New York-based watchdog group monitoring the tribunal, have been publicly denied by Cambodian and some U.N. officials.

But they were revived in February when a report surfaced on the German parliament's Web site alleging that a top U.N. tribunal official had acknowledged the kickbacks and accused a senior Cambodian administrator of corruption.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has only grudgingly supported the tribunal, last week attacked it for considering expanding the scope of defendants, a move he claims would be divisive for the country.

In what seemed to be an expression of contempt for the corruption allegations, he suggested the U.N. could just leave and let Cambodia run the trial on its own. The tribunal employs joint teams of Cambodian and international court personnel.

U.N. legal expert Taksoe-Jensen is scheduled to talk with Deputy Prime Minister Sok An on Monday in their third meeting on the corruption issue. Previous meetings have not resulted in agreement on how to deal with the allegations.

Lawyers for two defendants yet to be tried attempted to argue last week that the corruption allegations demonstrated that the judicial process was flawed, and the issue should be considered in their appeals for the release of their clients for pre-trial detention. The arguments by the lawyers for former Khmer Rouge foreign minister Ieng Sary and former head of state Khieu Samphan were not allowed by the judges. Lawyers for Nuon Chea the Khmer Rouge's top ideologue, had earlier raised similar arguments.

London-based Amnesty International has urged the U.N. and the Cambodian government to address the corruption allegations, saying they cast «serious doubts on the chambers' competence, independence and impartiality.