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Dartmouth Resident Judge Phillip Rapoza Named to UN-Backed Cambodia War Crimes Tribunal
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Phillip Rapoza, chief justice of the Massachusetts Appeals Court and a Dartmouth resident, has been appointed as a reserve judge for a United Nations-backed war crimes tribunal in Cambodia.

The tribunal is conducting trials with respect to serious crimes and alleged violations of human rights that occurred in Cambodia during the reign of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s.

As the International Reserve Judge for the Supreme Court Chamber of the tribunal, Rapoza, 62, may be asked to attend appellate arguments and to assist if a sitting judge is unable to perform his or her functions. Also, in the event of a vacancy, Rapoza could be called upon to fill that position.

Officials said Rapoza's appointment will not affect his tenure on the state Appeals Court and that he will continue to serve as the court's chief justice.

"I am honored by both the secretary-general's nomination and the approval of my appointment by the Cambodian authorities. The work of the (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia) is historic in nature, and it is humbling to be involved in this important undertaking," Rapoza said in prepared remarks.

Rapoza was an associate judge in Fall River District Court and a superior court judge before being appointed to the state appeals court by former Gov. Mitt Romney in 2006.

Rapoza, a grandson of Azorean immigrants, became the first Portuguese-American to serve on the state appeals court. In 1995, Rapoza was given the Outstanding Community Award from the Fall River Area Chamber of Commerce and was named a fellow of the Massachusetts Bar Association. He was also a former prosecutor who worked for private law firms before his appointment to the judiciary.

In 1997, the Fall River chapter of the Prince Henry Society named Rapoza its Man of the Year for his contributions to the Portuguese and local community.

In 2002, the president of Portugal decorated Rapoza, who holds the rank of Commander in the Order of Prince Henry the Navigator. He is also a recipient of the Brazilian Medal of International Merit.

Chief Justice Roderick L. Ireland of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court described Rapoza as “an exceptional judge” and a recognized leader in the judiciary.

“His appointment confirms the high regard in which he is held and reflects well not only on him, but also on the Massachusetts judiciary of which he is an important part,” Ireland said.

Officials said Rapoza consulted with Massachusetts ethics authorities before he accepted the international appointment. If he is asked to assume a permanent role on the Cambodian tribunal, the circumstances of his appointment would be re-examined at a later time, officials said.

Rapoza has previous experience on the international legal circuit. From 2003-05, and for a few weeks in June 2006, Rapoza served as a judge on a United Nations panel that conducted war crimes trials in East Timor. He was later assigned to a team of experts sent to East Timor to assess conditions there after widespread civil disorder.

Rapoza also headed a United Nations Criminal Justice Advisory Team in Haiti and has participated in programs and training missions in Cambodia related to the Khmer Rouge tribunal.

Rapoza is the current president of the International Penal and Penitentiary Foundation, which has consultative status with several UN agencies and promotes studies in the fields of crime prevention and the treatment of offenders.

Rapoza was recently nominated for the Cambodian tribunal by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and the nomination was approved by the Cambodian Supreme Council of Magistracy. The appointment was subsequently confirmed by royal decree of King Norodom Sihamoni.

As many as 2 million Cambodians were killed under the Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979. The work of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia — which is staffed by Cambodian and international judges — has been compared with the Nuremberg trials that adjudicated Nazi atrocities during World War II.