



Interference 'deplored' by judge

Maggie Tait

April 5, 2009

As Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen says he can't wait for the tribunal hearing cases against Pol Pot's henchmen to fold, Dame Silvia Cartwright says political interference in any court proceeding is deplorable.

Justice Cartwright, a New Zealander, is one of five judges sitting on the Khmer Rouge Tribunal which Hun Sen verbally lashed last Tuesday - the day after the UN-backed international-Cambodian court started hearing its first case.

It took 30 years to have the trials, and only five high-ranked cadres of the extreme communist regime are being charged, starting with Kaing Guek Eav, or Duch, who ran Tuol Sleng torture centre and prison.

The court has been beset by delays and accusations of corruption and political interference. The judges have ruled it is up to local authorities to examine such claims.

Prime Minister Hun Sen, in a speech on Tuesday, expressed disdain for the court and made it clear he wanted everything wrapped up as soon as possible.

There are concerns that the Duch trial could be the first and last the multi-million dollar court hears.

Money may be one way of ending the process. So far the court's budget has ballooned to \$170 million for five years.

"I would pray for this court to run out of money and for the foreign judges and prosecutors to walk out," Hun Sen said.

"That would allow for Cambodia to finish the trial by itself."

The Prime Minister's speech was also read as confirmation by some that the Cambodian representatives on the court were under his influence.

Dame Silvia would not comment directly, saying it was a political matter, but she was clearly unimpressed by the verbal attack.

"Countries where the rule of law is respected and where their citizens can be sure of a fair trial are those in which the independence of the courts and judges is guaranteed," she said.

"Comments, politically motivated or otherwise, which appear to be an attempt to interfere with that independence are therefore to be deplored."

** Maggie Tait travelled to Cambodia with the assistance of the Asia New Zealand Foundation.*