



Cambodian FM says genocide trial a balancing act

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Cambodia's genocide tribunal must balance the need for justice with that of ensuring stability in the Southeast Asian country, Foreign Minister Hor Namhong said Monday.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has warned that expanding the tribunal's scope beyond the five senior Khmer Rouge leaders in custody could divide the country. During its rule in the late 1970s, a total of 1.7 million people died and critics say that such a small number of defendants is unrealistic given the scope of the genocide.

Foreign Minister Hor Namhong said "we have to seek justice for our people" while considering the "peace and stability in the country." He said the government is not interfering with the operation of the tribunal.

He was speaking in an interview with The Associated Press on the sidelines of a summit between South Korea and the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations that began Monday.

Hun Sen, who is also attending the summit, said in March that expanding the genocide tribunal could spark a war and cause the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in his impoverished country. But the comments merely seemed aimed at putting pressure on the tribunal.

Critics of the tribunal, which is jointly run by Cambodia and the United Nations, charge that the government has sought to limit its scope because other suspects are now loyal to Hun Sen, and to arrest them could cause political trouble. There have even been suspicions that the trials may be halted.

Human Rights Watch said in February that the tribunal's credibility was threatened by allowing "political considerations" to get in the way of additional indictments.

International prosecutor Robert Petit has said he wants as many as six more possible defendants charged, but Cambodian prosecutor Chea Leang has resisted that.

Hor Namhong also said that watching the genocide trials, which are televised in Cambodia, is difficult as it dredges up the suffering he and his family endured during the reign, which lasted from 1975-1979. He said that he and his wife lost more than 30 members of their family.

But he added that convictions may also ultimately prove cathartic.

"Maybe that could help people to calm down their moral suffering," he said.

Hor Namhong's own role during the Khmer Rouge regime has been controversial and the subject of several lawsuits. He was among hundreds of Cambodian intellectuals who were living abroad and returned home at the request of the Khmer Rouge.

Upon their return many were held at the Boeng Trabek re-education camp and eventually executed. Hor Namhong sued an opposition leader for suggesting that he held a position of authority at the camp.