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Judge quits tribunal in Khmer Rouge inquiry

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BANGKOK — A German judge responsible for the indictment of [Khmer Rouge](#) suspects in a joint Cambodian-[U.N.](#) tribunal has resigned, citing political interference by the Cambodian government, the tribunal announced Monday.

The judge, Siegfried Blunk, cited a series of statements by Prime Minister [Hun Sen](#) and other officials to the effect that no more indictments should be handed down beyond an initial five, including an assertion by Mr. Hun Sen to the U.N. secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, that further trials “will not be allowed.”

Along with that comment, Judge Blunk quoted the Cambodian information minister as saying in May that if investigating judges wanted to pursue new cases, “they should pack their bags and leave.”

[A statement](#) Monday by the court said that because of comments like those, Judge Blunk’s “ability to withstand such pressure by government officials and to perform his duties independently could always be in doubt.”

Testimony is due to begin in the trial of four senior leaders in connection with the deaths of 1.7 million people when the Khmer Rouge held power, from 1975 to 1979. In the only case that has been heard, Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch, who ran the main Khmer Rouge prison, was sentenced to 35 years, a term that was reduced to 19 years.

Judge Blunk worked as a co-investigating judge with a Cambodian counterpart, You Bunleng, who had already stated that she did not believe it was necessary to pursue the cases, a statement that appeared to accord with the position of the Cambodian government.

The resignation follows months of controversy over the failure of the court to proceed with what are known as Case 003 and Case 004.

Legal experts and human rights groups had warned about the possibility of political influence since attempts began in the 1990s to set up a tribunal. Their criticism sharpened this year, particularly after the resignation of at least four staff members in the office of the co-investigating judges.

Human Rights Watch has been particularly critical of the proceedings and last week called on Judge Blunk, as well as his Cambodian counterpart, to resign after what the group called a failure “to conduct genuine, impartial and effective investigations” into the two cases.

“The investigating judges concluded their investigation into Case 003 without notifying the suspects, interviewing key witnesses or conducting crime site investigations,” said Brad Adams, the Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “This would be shocking for an ordinary crime, but it’s unbelievable when it involves some of the 20th century’s worst atrocities.”

Following the legal process of the tribunal, the two pending cases were submitted by a prosecutor to the prosecuting judges in 2009 for investigation and possible indictment.

In Case 003, leaked documents from the court show that the defendants are Sou Met and Meas Mut, both former generals in the Khmer Rouge army, who surrendered in the late 1990s.

The prosecutor’s submission accuses them of responsibility for “forced labor, inhumane living conditions, unlawful arrest and detention, physical and mental abuse, torture and killing” and of taking part in purges “which resulted in at least thousands and quite probably tens of thousands of deaths.”

Case 004 is believed to involve three other senior Khmer Rouge figures.

Testimony was to begin this year in Case 002, which involves the most senior figures to face the court. They are Khieu Samphan, the former Khmer Rouge head of state; Nuon Chea, the group’s chief ideologist; Ieng Sary, the former foreign minister; and his wife, Ieng Thirith, who was minister for social affairs.

The Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, died in the jungle in 1998.