

Canada asked to augment contribution to Cambodian genocide tribunal

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On the eve of the historic trial of the Khmer Rouge leaders responsible for one of the world's worst genocides, the Canadian-born lawyer prosecuting them came home for a rest and money to help complete his work.

Robert Petit, a lawyer at the Justice Department's war crimes unit who was appointed co-prosecutor for the Cambodia genocide tribunal, recently met with Canadian officials to ask for money and resources toward the \$34 million needed to start the trials of five indicted Khmer Rouge leaders that are expected to have a soap opera-style hold on a nation where hundreds of thousands died in the infamous Killing Fields.

The Cambodia tribunal, funded mostly by foreign donors, is facing a budget crunch. It is running out of money and will need more than \$59 million from international donors to complete the hearings by 2010. Canada is among the top 10 donors, having so far contributed about \$2 million. Japan is the largest donor and has so far picked up more than one-half of the cost.

Canada has helped fund every major multinational criminal tribunal and led the creation of the International Criminal Court, the world's first permanent court to prosecute war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.

Mr. Petit and UN officials are only looking for international donations and it's up to Cambodia to come up with its share.

The new budget of \$100 million is a far cry from the original \$56.3-million estimate, but it remains a bargain compared to the Rwanda and Yugoslavia genocide tribunals, which have so far cost about \$1 billion and \$1.4 billion, respectively.

Department of Foreign Affairs officials say the government is "comfortable" with the revised budget, but is "reviewing funding requests" and has yet to make a decision on whether to contribute more. They say Canada is "highly supportive" of bringing former Khmer Rouge leaders to justice as a step to lasting peace and reconciliation in Cambodia.

The budget crunch is the latest problem for the tribunal, which has been plagued by delays and corruption allegations since Cambodia first asked the United Nations for help in prosecuting Khmer Rouge leaders in 1997. It took a decade of wrangling between the UN and Cambodia to sort out the rules, and work finally began in 2006 with a unique mix of foreign judges, prosecutors, lawyers and other support staff.

After 30 years, five of the Khmer Rouge leaders, charged with murder and crimes against humanity against the 1.7 million people who died between 1975 and 1979 in what was known as Democratic Kampuchea, will finally stand trial.

The first trial is scheduled to begin this fall and will extend into 2010 if more charges are laid, as expected. Mr. Petit, however, knows he's racing against time because the accused are elderly and some are in failing health.

Canada has been a big contributor of money and staff to the tribunal. About eight per cent of all personnel are Canadian.

Mr. Petit says the tribunal's biggest contribution is helping citizens understand why Cambodians turned on their own people. The tribunal's legacy will be a record of what happened and why.

"Khmer killing Khmer in the name of a (Marxist) ideology bewildered them at the time and it's no clearer now. It hasn't been taught in schools and there's been no accountability. We are the best hope for setting the record straight on what happened and if it happened."

The first trial is expected to begin next month, with the youngest of the accused, Kaing Guek Eav, 66. He was director of the infamous S-21 prison where more than 14,000 of the Khmer Rouge's victims died. Most were Communist Party members accused by Khmer Rouge guerrillas of "betraying the revolution."