

Cambodian judiciary has "profound" problems: UN

By Ek Madra

May 19, 2006

PHNOM PENH (Reuters) - Cambodia's judicial system has "profound" and "very serious" problems hampering the emergence of a stable, fair society from the shadows of the Khmer Rouge genocide, the U.N.'s human rights chief said on Friday.

"This is probably the single most important area in which Cambodia needs to make progress," Human Rights Commissioner Louise Arbour told a news conference at the end of a five-day visit to the southeast Asian nation.

"An independent, professional judiciary with recognized integrity would not only be essential in protecting fundamental rights and freedoms, but also facilitate the resolution of a number of the difficulties evident in Cambodia, including impunity, conflict over land and corruption," she said.

An estimated 1.7 million people died in Pol Pot's four years in power in the 1970s. Virtually no judges survived the "Year Zero" ultra-Maoist revolution and the justice system has failed to recover despite millions of dollars of legal aid.

In addition to many judges having inadequate legal and professional backgrounds, the system has also been criticized as corrupt and political.

"There is a widespread perception of lack of integrity," Arbour said.

Special U.N. rights envoy Yash Ghai put it in stronger terms in March when he accused Prime Minister Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge soldier who has been in charge for two decades, of ruling with an "iron fist" and putting pressure on the courts.

His comments sparked a swift rebuke from Hun Sen, who dismissed the U.N.'s human rights office in Phnom Penh as a bunch of "long-term tourists" who didn't know what they were talking about.

At a meeting with Arbour on Thursday, Hun Sen said rights groups should stop writing Cambodia off as "hell" and stick to reporting the truth, but he appeared to have mellowed from his earlier calls on the U.N. to sack Ghai.

"The Prime Minister assured me that he was fully committed to the continued professional engagement of my office in this country. I am

satisfied with what he said to me," Arbour said.

She said Phnom Penh also needed to do more to ensure the rights of Cambodians to freedom of speech and peaceful protest were not curbed, as many critics say they have been since major anti-Thai riots in the capital in early 2003.

"The protection of civil society actors to contribute to a healthy democratic life is another area which needs a lot of attention," she said.

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