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High Fees Dropped for Cambodia's Khmer Rouge Tribunal

PHNOM PENH — Cambodia's bar association on Saturday dropped demands that foreign lawyers in the country's Khmer Rouge tribunal pay hefty legal fees, in a major step towards bringing perpetrators of genocide to justice.

The stalled trials were being threatened by the row over fees. The bar association was demanding foreign lawyers pay some 4,900 dollars a year if they wished to defend former Khmer Rouge leaders.

But the bar has cut the payment to 500 dollars for the entire period of the trials, said Nou Tharith, vice president of the association, which must approve all foreign defence counsel.

"We want to tackle this problem and we hope to push forward the trial procedure," he told a news conference Saturday.

International judges on the UN-backed tribunal earlier said if the bar did not drop the high payment demands, the adoption of tribunal rules necessary for the trials to go forward was in doubt.

The judges also argued the high fees would discourage foreign lawyers from joining the tribunal and deny defendants their right to counsel.

After nearly a decade of tough negotiations and many setbacks, the first trials of former Khmer Rouge leaders were initially expected this year.

But repeated delays mean trials are not likely to start until early 2008, officials say.

Rights groups and legal advocates have called for swift trials amid concerns that ageing Khmer Rouge leaders will die before being brought to justice for one of the worst genocides of the 20th century.

So far, only one possible defendant is in custody.

The only other person arrested for crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge's 1975-79 rule, military commander Ta Mok, died in prison last July, while Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot died in 1998.

Up to two million people died of overwork or starvation, or were executed, under the Khmer Rouge, which abolished religion, property rights, currency and schools.

Millions more were driven from the cities onto vast collective farms as the ultra-Maoist regime sought to create an agrarian utopia.

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