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Tribunal Trouble

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The Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia was one of the 20th century's most horrific crimes. The United Nations-sponsored war crimes tribunal that is seeking justice for the millions of victims has been wracked with allegations of corruption. So we're happy to report that outside scrutiny seems to be having an effect.

Last year, an audit of the tribunal, part of whose funding is supervised by the United Nations Development Program, found significant conflicts of interest in funding oversight, inflated salaries and underqualified staff. After this page exposed the audit's findings in September, the tribunal started to clean up its HR practices by improving hiring procedures and implementing a staff code of conduct.

Now, donor nations are turning up the heat. When the court released its revised budget to donors in January, it asked for an additional \$114 million and an extension of the court's life until 2011. The biggest country donors – including Japan, Germany and France – came back with such extensive questions that it took the court two months to prepare its response.

Among the questions: Why did the tribunal triple its original budget projection to \$170 million from \$56 million? Why did staff costs constitute around 70% of that increase – and what exactly will those staff be doing? And why is the court, now in its second year, taking so long to try the top Khmer Rouge officials, many of whom are now in their 80s?

It's good to see donor nations asking these questions, but it would be better if the public – who ultimately are footing the bill – also had access to information about how their tax dollars are being spent. It's unclear whether the court will ever publicly release the revised budget projection.

Without new funding, the Cambodian side of the court will run out of money by the end of May; the U.N. side of the court can last only a few months longer. It's in no one's interest to see the tribunal fall apart. The Cambodian government and the UNDP can honor the memories of the victims of the Khmer Rouge genocide by running a clean tribunal.