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Witness Protection at Khmer Trial Put into Question

By Agence-France Presse

PHNOM PENH — Not enough had been done to ensure the protection of witnesses called before Cambodia's Khmer Rouge tribunal, lawyers warned yesterday, adding the trials of former regime leaders could be jeopardized.

"We are concerned," said Rupert Skilbeck of the tribunal's Defense Office, which was established to ensure the rights of defendants.

"Compared to other tribunals, it's miniscule ... you have to get this right," he said, calling witnesses protection "insufficient."

"If witnesses are killed or intimidated, you won't have a fair trial," he said, speaking at a meeting on the challenges faced by the defense.

Potentially hundreds of people could be called to court as Cambodia tries former regime leaders, accused of one of the 20th century's worst genocides.

Up to two million people died of starvation, overwork, or were executed during the 1975 to 79 rule of the Khmer Rouge, which turned Cambodia into a vast collective farm between 1975 and 1979 in its drive for an agrarian utopia, forcing millions into the countryside.

A three-year, UN-Cambodian tribunal got underway in July, with co-prosecutors expected to hand up the names of potential defendants to an investigating judge by the end of the year.

Trials are expected to start in the middle of next year.

A top genocide researcher has that likely witnesses had gone into hiding amid protection fears.

Under the current arrangement, witnesses will come under the protection of Cambodian police, who critics say have a history of corruption and brutality.

"The setup of witness protection as currently envisaged will be wholly inadequate," the report said.

"Relying on a police force that has a reputation for corruption

and incompetence would place the lives of the witnesses at risk," he said.

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