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The Price of Justice

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The Khmer Rouge war-crimes tribunal released its budget wish list Tuesday, and it isn't petty cash. The court is asking for \$86 million to stay in business through December 2010 and possibly more if the trials take longer. That's less than they were asking for in February, when an earlier version of the budget stood at \$114 million. But donors should still be wary.

The tribunal, run jointly by the United Nations and the Cambodian government, wants typical Turtle Bay flab: a built-in 15% contingency fund that amounts to \$11 million over the next 2 1/2 years. Donors are balking, and so far only Japan and Cambodia have pitched in a meager \$4 million. As we went to press the steering committee was debating whether to scale the contingency fund back to 7.5% of the budget.

The tribunal's money troubles this year have been transformative. As the reserves dwindled, the tribunal started petitioning donors for money and the biggest lenders pressed the tribunal to slim down and be more transparent.

The pressure seems to be working. Over the past six months, the tribunal has made audits public, slimmed down its operations and shortened its proposed timeline. An infusion of new management has also helped. In April, Deloitte reviewed the tribunal's human-resources management and found its practices "robust" and "ready to take on the next phase of operations." The team of reviewers said five employees were underqualified for their jobs. They were fired.

There's still a way to go. Some of Deloitte's simplest recommendations, such as strengthening the code of conduct, have yet to be implemented. Deloitte suggested that the code include a pledge to report violations and not to offer or accept gifts or money. (Currently, only accepting gifts is forbidden). More seriously, past allegations of kickbacks have yet to be investigated.

The best thing about the new budget is that it will keep the court accountable to donors by asking for money in phases, instead of receiving a lump sum. The first phase ends in December 2009, at which point the court will have its hand out again. That will give donors the opportunity to examine the court's progress and its use of taxpayers' funds – and ask tough questions. As well they should.