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Khmer tribunal stalled again

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has thrown another log in the road to justice for citizens of the region's most abused country. The premier announced that while he, his government and parliament all had agreed to pay a share of the cost of a tribunal for former Khmer Rouge leaders, they just can't do it. That throws another pallover the quickly dying hope that the main, surviving butchers of the Pol Pot era will pay for the crimes of the horrible days of Khmer Rouge rule. There is more than good reason to doubt Hun Sen's glib explanation that he can't fund a trial because the country is broke.

According to the prime minister's statement, Cambodia might be able to come up with about \$1.5 million of the \$13 million it promised to provide. That promise came after years of excruciating talks between Cambodia and foreign friends, with delay and dodge at every turn, on every point, by Hun Sen and his officials. The talks frustrated even the United Nations, which simply walked out at one point. The US and Europe negotiated the UN's sceptical agreement to talk again.

Last year, the UN and several concerned members thought they had reached agreement. The final hurdle, after evading hundreds thrown out by Hun Sen and his government, was over how to fund the tribunal. The UN agreed to provide \$43 million to help a three-year, Cambodian-controlled trial _ the equivalent of 1.8 billion baht, no small amount. Premier Hun Sen committed the rest. Now, he says, he just doesn't have the money.

In some cases, compassionate agencies and foreign friends might be sympathetic to the claim that Cambodia has run out of available cash. But years of experience have produced different reactions _ vexation and suspicion. Corruption in Cambodia has become rife, including within the government. In addition, there has long been doubt, spread over the years of discussion about a Khmer Rouge tribunal, that Premier Hun Sen has any desire to see such an event, which would surely see his own days as a Khmer Rouge commander brought up again.

Neither the international community nor the people of Cambodia have much choice in these events. The greatest fear among UN officials and diplomats in Cambodia is that even if they hold their noses and finance a tribunal, Hun Sen and his government supporters will torpedo

it by delay, obfuscation and bringing only minor Khmer Rouge functionaries to the dock for many more years. Khmer Rouge leaders have already died of old age. These include their odious leader Pol Pot and his heavily involved wife, Khieu Ponnary. The highest ranking living suspect, Ieng Sary, lives with his wife and accused murderess Ieng Thirith in a protected western Cambodia village, more happily and more prosperously than most Cambodian people.

As much as United Nations members would like to see payment of their debts by Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan and other cold-blooded killers of between one and 3.5 million of their fellow Khmers, the Cambodian people deserve to see such a trial. No one who knows the country can doubt the huge damage to a population that has struggled for 25 years to deal with the after-effects of three and a half years of the most brutal rule in Southeast Asian history.

The superficial claim that the government can't come up with money for a tribunal was unconvincing. It ignored a hugely conciliatory offer by Japan to allow the government to use aid funds for its paltry share of the tribunal. It also brushed aside all consideration of the importance of a tribunal to the Cambodian people.

In short, it is fair to assume that the Cambodian government and Prime Minister Hun Sen have access to the needed funds for a tribunal that would benefit their people. It is fair to speculate why the premier has pleaded poverty rather than attempt to find the funds. He may find it convenient to blame the world community. The truth is Hun Sen has no intention of allowing any meaningful tribunal to judge the Khmer Rouge crimes of excess.