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Cambodia: Amnesty International calls for an end to impunity

Amnesty International today condemned recent moves by the Cambodian government to allow senior former Khmer Rouge leaders Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea to escape justice and live without fear of arrest in northwest Cambodia.

"It is a tragedy for Cambodia that, just as the international community is tackling the issue of impunity for gross violators by establishing an international criminal court, the authorities should be institutionalising impunity for the terrible crimes of the recent past", Amnesty International said, adding that "without justice, there can be no progress".

During a press conference this Tuesday afternoon, local time, in Phnom Penh, Khieu Samphan repeatedly stated that "let bygones be bygones". However Amnesty International says "bygones are never bygones until the truth has been told."

Following the death of Pol Pot, the two men are believed to be the key surviving architects in the deaths of over one million Cambodians during the period of Khmer Rouge rule. The decision by Prime Minister Hun Sen to welcome them back into the community follows a pattern established in 1996, when amnesty was granted to another senior Khmer Rouge leader, Ieng Sary.

Hun Sen's actions directly contradict a request he made to the United Nations in 1997, and repeated in 1998, for international assistance to bring to justice those responsible for the violations committed during the Khmer Rouge period in office.

From its experience Amnesty International believes that impunity -- literally exemption from punishment -- is the most serious human rights problem in Cambodia today. It lies at the heart of Cambodia's ongoing human rights problems; those in authority can commit human rights abuses, safe in the knowledge that they will never be held to account for their actions.

"Allowing the architects of one of the world's most brutal regimes to escape justice in comfortable retirement, while so many of those whose lives and hopes they destroyed remain mired in poverty, pain and suffering, is a gross insult to the hundreds of thousands of victims of Khmer Rouge brutality," Amnesty International said. "The people of Cambodia are again being sold short by those with the power to help them."

Amnesty International is appealing to the Cambodian monarch King Norodom Sihanouk, and to the Cambodian government to reverse this decision and bring these men to justice.

"The time to act is now," Amnesty International said. "This is the final opportunity to hold to account those believed to be responsible for the deaths, torture and killings of the Khmer Rouge years."

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For further information or to arrange an interview with Amnesty International's researcher on Cambodia, please phone +44 171 413 5566 or mobile phones: 0468 670 248 or 07887 690 792 (if calling the mobile phones from abroad, please drop the "0" and add "44")