

Ban ends eventful visit

**Keuth Sophak Chakrya
and Cheang Sokha**

A LOCAL activist attempting to deliver a petition to Ban Ki-moon was beaten unconscious and arrested yesterday by police and military police, as the United Nations secretary general concluded his three-day visit to the Kingdom.

Suong Sophorn, 23, was dragged

into a police car before being treated at Daun Penh district referral hospital following an incident in which six others were injured.

They were part of a group of roughly 100 people who gathered outside the Cambodian-Russian Friendship Hospital during Ban's visit to the facility to protest against their impending eviction from the capital's Boeung Kak lakeside.

"They hit me in the head with a

walkie-talkie, punched me in the face several times, hit me with an electric baton and then pulled me into the car by the throat," Suong Sophorn said yesterday.

He said he was released from custody after signing a pledge to stop leading protests.

Rights groups estimate that more than 4,000 families will be evicted to make room for a 133-hectare development owned by a ruling party senator.

Daun Penh deputy governor Sok Penhvuth denied that police had used force against the protesters.

"Suong Sophorn pushed the authorities and then hit his head against the police car door," Sok Penhvuth said. "No one hit or arrested him – the police just helped him get treatment."

The incident came a day after Prime Minister Hun Sen asked Ban to remove Christophe Peschoux, the longtime country director of the UN

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and shut the OHCHR offices in Cambodia.

"What further indication is required that a UN human rights office is needed in Cambodia if the police are willing to beat a young protester unconscious during a visit by the highest-ranking UN official?" said John Coughlan, a legal consultant at the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights.

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Ban stresses need for independent KRT

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Yves Sorokobi, a spokesman for the secretary general, said it was not up to Hun Sen to make decisions on UN staffing.

"Pulling staff out of a particular country or not is a matter of internal personnel issues, it's a matter for the secretary general to decide," Sorokobi said. "In the meantime, we fully stand by the work of the human rights commissioner and by her representatives around the world, including here."

Soroki said the office's work in Cambodia was a matter of "bilateral cooperation" and that Ban would consider Hun Sen's request to close the office "in due course".

Peschoux said on Wednesday that his office was "discussing the matter internally" and could not comment further.

During meetings with Ban on Wednesday, Hun Sen also

informed the UN head that the government would not allow the pending investigations in the third and fourth cases at the Khmer Rouge tribunal to move to trial. Following a tour of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum yesterday, Ban responded to these comments, affirming the importance of the court's independence.

"This is an international judicial process, so this is a decision to be made by the court," Ban said. He added that he had engaged in multiple discussions of the issue with Hun Sen and Deputy Prime Minister Sok An over the course of his trip.

"I can tell you that the government of Cambodia is committed to completion of process, and the United Nations will discuss this matter with the international community, particularly donors," Ban said.

The Open Society Justice Initiative called Hun Sen's com-

ments "an unacceptable attempt to strangle the court".

"Hun Sen has just raised the stakes for the court dramatically," OSJI Executive Director James A Goldston said in a statement. "The tribunal has no choice but to proceed expeditiously with Cases 003/004 to establish that it does not take orders from the government."

Information Minister Khieu Kanharith yesterday denied that Hun Sen had interfered with the court, but reiterated concerns about the potentially destabilising effects of Cases 003 and 004. Nevertheless, he also suggested that the cases could be handled by the domestic court system, rather than the UN-backed tribunal, in an effort to save money.

"At the moment, the expenses of the court are much more than those for the Ministry of Justice for a whole year," Khieu Kanharith said. "Samdech [Hun

Sen] thought that Cases 001 and 002 were enough for the Cambodian staff to get procedural experience, so that's why Samdech wants to transfer the other cases to other courts."

Donors have approved a US\$87 million budget for the tribunal's operations this year and next year. The court's international side faces a \$30 million funding shortfall for next year, while the national side needs an additional \$9 million, according to the OSJI.

In remarks delivered following his tour of Tuol Sleng, Ban praised the court and the Kingdom for attempting to address the crimes of the Khmer Rouge period.

"Your courage sends a powerful message to the world that there can be no impunity, that crimes against humanity shall not go unpunished," Ban said.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY JAMES O'TOOLE