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Cambodia Leader's Aides Face French Trial Over Deadly 1997 Attack



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A French judge has ordered two security aides for Cambodian leader Hun Sen to stand trial over their role in a 1997 grenade attack that killed 16 people, a source close to the case said Wednesday.

The attack targeted Sam Rainsy, a long-time opponent of strongman Sen's rule, who is also a French citizen and has lived in self-exile since 2015 to avoid prosecution in Cambodia.

Judge Sabine Kheris ruled that Huy Piseth and Hing Bun Heang, the former chief and deputy chief of Sen's bodyguards unit, should stand trial based on the "unanimous" conclusions of inquiries by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, the United Nations and Human Rights Watch.

Hing Bun Heang, now 65, is believed to have hired the attackers, and Huy Piseth, 66, to have helped facilitate their escape after throwing the grenades, which wounded another 150 people but did not kill Rainsy.

The two men face charges of complicity in murder, according to the judge's indictment order of December 30, after French arrest warrants were issued in 2020.

"French justice is closing in seriously if not dangerously against Prime Minister Hun Sen -- if it weren't for his diplomatic immunity, he would be the one in the dock instead of his subordinates," Rainsy's lawyer Pierre-Olivier Sur told AFP.

However, no date was set for trial and the suspects are not in France.

Rainsy, who obtained a French passport in 1974, initially filed his complaint in Paris in 2000, but dropped it after returning to Cambodia in 2006.

His continued activism against Sen's regime led to further self-exile in France and he obtained a new inquiry into the 1997 attack in 2012.

Sen, a 69-year-old former Khmer Rouge cadre, is one of the world's longest-serving leaders, maintaining a 36-year grip on power with methods that critics say include jailing political opponents and activists.

Rainsy risks a trial on charges of incitement and defamation if he returns home.

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