

# Rebuilding Cambodia's judicial system

## Increasing the capacity of Cambodian judges through OHCHR's Judicial Mentor Programme



Photo: OHCHR Cambodia

Court hearing at Phnom Penh Municipal Court, Cambodia

In his early court days, when he had a question about a procedural issue or about the application of a specific law, Judge Hing Thirith could always ask his mentor at the Phnom Penh municipal court about it. He was among the couple of dozens of judges who between 1995 and 2002 benefited from OHCHR's Judicial Mentor Programme – an initiative launched to assist the new Cambodia Government in the rebuilding and reform of its fledgling judicial system.

The Cambodian justice sector faced many challenges, not least a lack of trained personnel resulting from years of persecution of those considered to be “intellectuals”. In order to help rectify the situation and to assist the newly-appointed judges, OHCHR provided technical assistance to the domestic courts with consultants - judges or experienced lawyers from other countries – who provided daily advice and training to judges, prosecutors and other court personnel on administrative and legal issues, focusing on the implementation of international human rights standards in their work. The consultants were able to monitor and scrutinize irregularities, identify problems and suggest solutions directly to the judges. The programme received the full backing of Ministry of Justice, who requested that it be extended to cover more institutions.

Initially launched with a \$200,000 contribution from Japan to the UN Trust Fund for Human Rights Education in Cambodia, over the years, the Programme covered a total of 16 courts, including provincial and municipal courts as well as the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal. It operated in 13 provinces, including Battambang, Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Takeo, Svay Rieng, and in the capital city of Phnom Penh.

Advice was provided on countless cases, many of which consequently followed fair trial standards and facilitated Cambodians' access to justice, often seeing those illegally arrested or detained released.

“The mentors helped the judges focus on the law while reaching their decisions and thereby reduced human rights violations and arbitrary detentions.”

Mr. Hing Thirith  
Former Judge, Phnom Penh Municipal Court

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