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## Cheam Channy Trial Begins Amid Scrutiny

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In the glare of spotlights and with television cameras and RCAF soldiers on standby, the trial of opposition parliamentarian Cheam Channy opened at the Military Court on Monday.

Soldiers and senior foreign diplomats looked on as a composed Cheam Channy was escorted into the courtroom, before a handful of witnesses for the prosecution who accused him of using them to recruit thousands of troops for a so-called illegal armed force.

Cheam Channy's defense was not allowed to interview the witnesses, and defense witnesses were not allowed to testify.

"I want you to release me," Cheam Channy told the court, adding that he had operated a shadow government but not an illegal armed force.

"What I've done is without any willingness for destruction, but with the intention to develop the country," Cheam Channy said.

The first witness, Long Sary, a construction worker in Phnom Penh, claimed that Cheam Channy promoted him, in the alleged illegal armed force, to a rank equal to commander of RCAF Division 14 in Banteay Meanchey province. Long Sary said he was also promoted to the rank of deputy chief of staff at Military Region Five in Battambang province.

After the shadow appointments, Long Sary said he recruited troops for the illegal armed force.

"I recruited 40,000 troops" the construction worker told the

court.

"All the staff I recruited were dressed in army uniform," Long Sary said, adding that documents proving this have since been burned.

The courtroom audience snickered during Long Sary's testimony.

"I can't remember everything because Cheam Channy cheated me and I became crazy now. He cheated me a lot," Long Sary said.

Long Sary added that although the 40,000 troops did not have weapons, police and military would have joined them if they rose up against the government.

"Whenever we fight, troops inside the government will come out and fight," he said.

The second witness, Keo Sithan, said he recruited 64 people for the illegal armed force while a third witness, Thach Vang, said he recruited 1,800 people.

Cheam Channy recruited former Khmer Rouge and Lon Nol soldiers, and "jobless students," Thach Vang told the court.

Nine witnesses were scheduled to give evidence, but only five gave testimony.

Cheam Channy said he appointed more than 100 people for the shadow government, including teachers, garment factory workers, police, soldiers and motorbike taxi drivers.

They had to provide information to him on development, land-grabbing by RCAF officials, factory demonstrations and villager protests, he said.

"We used the information to dis-

help them," he said.

But military prosecutor Prum Sorn Thon said Cheam Channy's spokesmen were used "to find out top secret issues inside the army."

"It's a serious mistake to be punished by the law," Prum Sorn Thon said.

"This group also cheated money from people," in return for jobs in the government and police, he said. "I can assure that this is a scam."

Mao Sophearith, Cheam Channy's lawyer, compared the shadow government to similar entities in the UK, Australia and Japan.

"This is a preparation of human resources to replace the government when the [Sam Rainsy] Party is elected," he said. "The confessions of the witnesses are baseless."

"If Long Sary had recruited 40,000 people...where are they, and what are their names?" he asked.

Mao Sophearith alleged that the witnesses for the prosecution broke the law by giving false testimony and should be punished.

Officials from the US, Australian and British embassies attended the trial but declined comment.

Naly Pilorge, director of local rights group Licadho, condemned the proceedings.

"There was absolutely no credible evidence shown to back up the charges brought against Mr Cheam Channy," she said. "Today was an example of a show trial. It was an outrage."

The verdict is expected to be announced today.