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## Court Hears Testimony in 1997 Attack

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A Municipal Court prosecutor heard testimony Wednesday pointing to Prime Minister Hun Sen's bodyguard unit as conspirators in the March 30, 1997, grenade attack on a peaceful rally led by opposition leader Sam Rainsy.

US citizen Ron Abney, the country director of the US-funded International Republican Institute, who was wounded in the attack, lodged his testimony with Prosecutor Yet Chakriya as part of a lawsuit filed by Sam Rainsy against the premier in February.

Recounted to reporters after more than two hours of closed-door questioning at the court, Abney's story matched the version of events that he and others have offered during the seven years since the attack.

He said a contingent of the prime minister's bodyguard unit was posted at the perimeter of the rally across from the National Assembly when at least four grenades exploded.

The assailants ran in the direction of the prime minister's heavily guarded compound and toward the bodyguards, who allowed them pass through their lines but blocked Sam Rainsy supporters

from pursuing them, Abney said.

Hun Sen's bodyguards "could see what was happening. They knew what was going on," he said at the courthouse.

Sam Rainsy's civil lawsuit has resurrected interest in the brutal attack and drawn attention to a government investigation criticized by many as a whitewash. At least 16 people were killed and more than 100 wounded in the attack, which apparently targeted Sam Rainsy and a crowd of supporters protesting corruption in the judiciary.

Earlier this year, Hun Sen offered his own testimony to Yet Chakriya and reiterated his declaration of innocence.

The prosecutor recorded that testimony at the premier's residence on Aug 19. Yet Chakriya declined to discuss the details of their meeting.

Yet Chakriya also declined comment following Wednesday's questioning session, which Abney said was cut short by the prosecutor's refusal to allow his testimony as a witness. Instead, he was allowed to testify only as a victim.

Abney, who was then director of IRI, is a strident critic of Hun Sen and has recently returned to that post on an interim basis.

A shrapnel wound Abney suffered in the attack opened the door for the US Federal Bureau of Investigation to conduct its own probe, but within months agents had pulled out of Cambodia and left the bulk of their findings buried in a classified report.

Abney acknowledged that Wednesday's proceedings were likely futile, calling the court's handling of the case and the government's investigation a "joke."

More importantly, Abney said, there are indications that with changes in the US administration, the FBI could release its classified report.

According to one recently declassified passage of the report, then-US Ambassador Kenneth Quinn and an FBI agent met with co-Minister of Interior Sar Kheng on May 2, 1997 and said that evidence pointed to members of Hun Sen's bodyguard unit.

Reached by phone Wednesday, Om Yentieng, an adviser to Hun Sen who has been a key figure in the government's investigation, defended the government's efforts and said Abney's statements were baseless.

"We are pleased that he has appeared at court, but he has no proof for anything he has said," Om Yentieng said.