

Grenade attack inquiry denounced as cover-up

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in Phnom Penh

CAMBODIAN authorities set in motion yesterday what is already seen as a cover-up investigation of the grenade attack on an opposition political leader.

It was the worst act of political violence since the UN-run elections four years ago.

At least 16 people have now died as a result of the attack on a demonstration led by Sam Rainsy, including three Cambodian journalists who were standing close to him. The serious nature of many of the injuries makes it likely that more will die.

A woman featured in press photographs sitting dazed with a broken leg later died from loss of blood. The bodyguard who pushed Mr Rainsy to the ground as the first grenade exploded was himself killed. Mr Rainsy's escape, says a Western analyst, was "a miracle".

Phnom Penh hospitals are treating more than 150 people

injured by the four grenades, a high proportion of a crowd initially estimated to number only 150-200. In one hospital three patients are blinded and several more have lost limbs.

The investigation started after the second prime minister, Hun Sen, agreed yesterday to a proposal by the first prime minister, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, that it should be conducted jointly by their respective parties, the royalist Funcinpec and the Cambodian People's Party.

The decision not to leave the investigation to the police, widely seen as dominated by the CPP, is encouraging, a human rights worker commented.

But there is little expectation that the investigation will lead to a credible result, in a country where the murder of journalists, and a grenade attack on members of another opposition party 18 months ago after a warning by Mr Hun Sen, have not been solved.

Mr Rainsy said yesterday that he had no illusions what-

soever about the result of the investigation. "Any serious investigation would lead back to Mr Hun Sen himself; so how can you expect a proper resolution?"

Western observers are convinced that the attack, by at least two men, one in a car, was intended to assassinate Mr Rainsy and to kill many sympathisers.

They draw attention to the curious absence of police — normally present at demonstrations — and the proximity to the demonstration of Mr Hun Sen's private security staff, who allowed one man identified as a grenade thrower to escape but blocked attempts to pursue him.

There are fears that any respite in the political battles that spawned Sunday's carnage may be only temporary. The grenade attack was "just the beginning of the violence", a royalist MP, Ahmad Yahya, said yesterday.

"I think we will have more from now until the elections. Democracy in Cambodia is doing a U-turn now."