

Rainsy accuses US of cover-up

The state department and the US envoy of Cambodia have asked the FBI to suppress information which would implicate Hun Sen in the Phnom Penh grenade attack last year, according to Sam Rainsy.

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The US state department and American Ambassador to Cambodia Kenneth Quinn are guilty of a cover-up in connection with a grenade blast at a political rally in Phnom Penh last year, according to opposition party leader Sam Rainsy.

He said he recently delivered a fugitive to the FBI who confessed to throwing the hand grenade, but the new confession was now being covered up because the findings allegedly incriminated Hun Sen, Cambodia's second prime minister.

The former finance minister said Hun Sen must be investigated for these and other alleged murders, plus drug trafficking, and the pocketing of "\$500 million" during his corrupt reign.

Hun Sen, who is currently hospitalised after a Friday night appendix operation, has consistently denied similar allegations in the past as a plot to smear him.

When asked to respond to Mr Rainsy's charges, Ambassador Quinn patched through a telephone call from Phnom Penh to Washington so state department assistant secretary Stanley Roth could reply.

In the telephone interview, conducted in the pre-dawn hours of Monday morning in the US, Mr Roth said Mr Rainsy's allegations were "absolute nonsense".

"I don't like to see attacks on the US State Department, or Ambassador Quinn, for political purposes," he said.

Referring to the FBI's examination of witnesses and evidence from the Mar 30, 1997 grenade attack in Phnom Penh, Mr Roth said: "I would like nothing better than to find out who did it."

"This is an ongoing investigation. The FBI is handling that with no advice or hint on what to do" from the State Department.

Asked about the content of the FBI's interview with the alleged bomber, Mr Roth said: "I have no idea. I don't know what he said. This interview was on June 4."

"It was on Quinn's initiative that this person was brought to the FBI. It is exasperating when the US takes the lead in bringing something to the FBI that the US gets criticised."

"It is an FBI investigation because of American interest" resulting from injuries suffered by a US citizen in the attack.

Mr Rainsy described the grenade attack as an assassination attempt against himself, which missed, and killed and injured people in a crowd he was addressing in a small park in central Phnom Penh.

He also charged that Mr Quinn placed a "block" on the FBI investigation because it would mar the last months of his diplomatic assignment here, with the envoy attempting to maintain good relations with Hun Sen.

In a three-hour interview on Monday, an outraged Mr Quinn said: "I would challenge anyone to produce any evidence or indication that I, or my embassy, ever took any action to influence the FBI investigation in any direction."

An embassy spokesman added: "FBI headquarters in Washington has acknowledged in writing that this has never occurred, and that the ambassador and his embassy have provided all assistance the FBI requested."

The squabble among Mr Roth, Mr Quinn and Mr Rainsy over the FBI investigation began when Mr Rainsy made the remarks on Sunday during a 90-minute taped interview on the campaign trail.

While speeding south on Highway Five from a campaign rally in Kompong Chhnang back to the capital, Phnom Penh, Mr Rainsy said: "I have sent people working under my instruction, directly under my instruction, to provide further evidence of Hun Sen's involvement in the grenade attack to the FBI."

"One of the perpetrators I brought to the FBI, the person himself. He threw the grenade, and he looks exactly like the sketch produced by the FBI. And I'm afraid that the FBI is under political pressure not to react."

Asked what pressure, Mr Rainsy replied: "By the State Department, not to make public any conclusion because this would create a lot of problems for bilateral relations between the present Phnom Penh government and Washington."

"I deplore this attitude because I think investigations should be above politics."

"And I regret that the American administration has put political consideration above justice, and serious investigation to render justice to innocent victims."

"I think the FBI has now enough information, enough evidence, about Hun Sen's involvement because the

guy was Hun Sen's bodyguard and he told the FBI, as he told me, that he took orders directly from the head of Hun Sen's bodyguard unit."

After questioning the alleged killer, the FBI released him, said Mr Rainsy.

"The FBI could have no authority to arrest him in Bangkok. And I have made a promise to the guy that he would not be arrested, otherwise he would not accept to come to Bangkok."

"How can the FBI in Thailand arrest a Cambodian citizen involved in a crime committed in Cambodia? It was just to exchange information so that the FBI has, at least, more information."

Mr Rainsy quoted an FBI official who was "entitled to speak on behalf of the FBI", who allegedly revealed a disturbing plot.

"He said: 'I cannot do what I want. I cannot say what I want. I cannot conduct my investigation the way I want because I am under pressure.'"

Mr Rainsy insisted this FBI official blamed the "foreign relationship between two countries. If it was in America, there would not be that kind of problem," said the former finance minister.

"So, pressure because of a bilateral relationship between two countries? It can only be the State Department."

"I asked him in the United States would you be submitted to the same pressure? And he said: 'No, in the United States we do our job properly, but here in your country, in Cambodia, I cannot do my job properly.'"

Mr Rainsy also blasted Ambas-

sador Quinn's role in the FBI case.

"He is non-committal, and non-cooperative, regarding this. He does not want to be involved because it would complicate his work. He wants to have a good relationship with everybody in Cambodia, including with Hun Sen, especially with Hun Sen.

"So if he pushes for this investigation leading to Hun Sen being pointed out as behind the murder, I think he (Quinn) would look very bad, because why has he entertained such a good relationship, for such a long time, with such a criminal?

"So that is why he has to minimise all these stories, and why he has to block this investigation.

"Regarding the grenade attack of Mar 30, 1997, Hun Sen's bodyguards were found directly involved. And knowing the system in Cambodia, nobody would take such an initiative without at least the consent, not to say under the direct order, of Hun Sen."

Mr Rainsy also said Hun Sen dealt with Cambodian and foreign criminals.

"Hun Sen needs the financial support of the mafia. The communists, they are not good financial and economic managers.

"They have the political power which they use in a discretionary, arbitrary manner, and which they use to support the mafia, to give exclusive economic rights to the mafia. And in return the mafia provides them with economic support."

Asked if he would investigate and charge Hun Sen with illegal activity if he wins Sunday's election, Mr Rainsy said: "Investigate, at least investigate. And if it is appropriate, and if the court finds enough evidence, he must be prosecuted accordingly.

"I would mention the extra-judicial executions, and many politically motivated killings and crimes, so at least we should start a serious investigation regarding these hundreds of crimes."

Hun Sen, along with Mr Rainsy and deposed first prime minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh, appear to be the three top contenders in Sunday's race to become Cambodia's leader for the next five years.

Mr Rainsy's election strength appears to be among urban-based intellectuals, liberals and other idealists impressed with his economic acumen and outspoken allegations against Hun Sen and Prince Ranariddh.

Critics, however, say Mr Rainsy is yet another opportunist who wants to enrich and empower himself at Cambodia's expense.

Hun Sen, meanwhile, enjoys massive support in the countryside thanks to 23 years as prime minister atop a political machine perceived by many as brutal, intimidating and protected by official "impunity".

Hun Sen's supporters insist he will win a majority because his extensive development projects, down-to-earth

style and savvy ability to defeat all enemies make him popular with people in need.

Prince Ranariddh may have slipped to third place because of disillusionment with his four-year reign as co-prime minister, which was marked by increased corruption, elitist incompetence and an inability to wield power after he won a slight majority against Hun Sen in 1993.

Loyalists of Prince Ranariddh prefer to stress his royal links as the son of one of King Norodom Sihanouk's many wives, and say he can attract foreign investment and modernise this devastated nation.

Although some Cambodian and foreign election analysts see Mr Rainsy making great gains in popularity and beating Prince Ranariddh, many expect Hun Sen to take the biggest share of the vote.

All three men, however, are expected to end up squabbling for positions in a polarised coalition government alongside a slew of other contenders because no one will win the required 82-seat majority in parliament to claim sole victory.

As a result, Cambodia's next government is predicted to be a messy coalition wracked by infighting which could again erupt in bloodshed echoing tank-led street battles in July 1997 in which Hun Sen ousted Prince Ranariddh from his coalition post as co-prime minister.

More than 100 people, mostly Prince Ranariddh supporters, perished in that feud which some diplomats described as a "coup" by Hun Sen.

◆ Richard Ehrlich is a former correspondent for United Press International.