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Eastern blocs

Ruslan, 35, loads blocks of ice on a truck outside Yakutsk, in the Republic of Sakha, in northeastern Russia. The coldest temperatures in the northern hemisphere have been recorded in Sakha, the location of the Oymyakon valley where, according to the United Kingdom Met Office, a temperature of -67.8 degrees Celsius was registered in 1933 — the coldest on record in the northern hemisphere since the beginning of the 20th century. Despite the harsh climate, people live in the valley, and the area is equipped with schools, a post office, a bank and even an airport runway (albeit open only in the summer). REUTERS

Hearings open on mini-trials

Stuart White

IN THE first hearing held since the Khmer Rouge tribunal's highest body nullified a controversial severance order, prosecutors yesterday urged that heavier charges be levied against the aging defendants in Case 002/01 before the window of opportunity closes.

During a day of submissions on how to proceed after the severance decision was voided earlier this month, the prosecution called for the addition of charges stemming from the infamous S-21 detention centre.

Those calls, first made more than a year ago, were blocked when the Trial Chamber decided that crimes allegedly committed at the prison fell outside of the scope of the court's first so-called "mini-trial", or Case 002/01, which dealt only with the forced movement of populations.

The annulment of the very order establishing the mini-trials, however, has left the court in the position of deciding between two choices.

One is persisting with its current model, which will likely see only the completion of the first mini-trial before age renders the accused unfit to face charges now reserved for later mini-trials.

The second, as prosecutor Chea Leang put it, is "to accept that the deteriorating health of the accused

Continues on page 4

Factory initiative failure

Shane Worrell and Mom Kunthear

Report says workers' concerns ignored

HAMSTRUNG by its own confidential reporting system and an unwillingness to take a stand on rampant labour issues, the International Labour Organization's Better Factories Cambodia (BFC) initiative is no longer a "best practice" model for improving conditions in garment factories, a report by a leading US university says. *Monitoring in the Dark: An Evaluation of the International Labour*

Organization's Better Factories Monitoring and Reporting Program, released yesterday, says workers have lost confidence in BFC, founded in 2001, partly because its factory reporting process catered more to the needs of brands and bosses than theirs.

"BFC's current operating practices... contribute to the program's under-effectiveness, due primarily to a glaring lack of transparency and an insti-

tutional over-emphasis on protecting the interests of factory owners and international buyers, rather than responding to appeals from garment workers to protect them from abuse," the report says.

Launched yesterday in Phnom Penh by the International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic at Stanford Law School and the Workers Rights Consortium, the report speaks of a lack

of clarity regarding BFC's methods and says it has no formal procedure to handle complaints from workers.

It also claims BFC rarely takes a stand on labour issues, such as a decline in real wages over the past decade.

"BFC has not... used its public reports or newsletters to present statistics that document the growing gap between garment workers' wages and the cost of living," the report says.

"Labour activists believe that the BFC needs to focus more of its energy on the issue of declining wages."

Excessive overtime has been widespread in the past decade, the majority of the industry's workforce has been shifted to fixed-duration contracts and collective bargaining has been scant, the report continues.

Apparel from the garment industry, most of which goes to the US and the EU, is exported at a rate of \$4 billion per

Continues on page 2

Push for clean cities

Business - page 9

Sex for contracts

World

Nadal bounces back

- page 22

1 3 4 5 11 6 7 8 9 11 14

