



'First Lady' threatened co-leaders

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PHNOM PENH - THE Khmer Rouge 'First Lady' has threatened her fellow former regime leaders and prison guards at least 70 times while detained at Cambodia's UN-backed genocide court, a prosecutor said on Monday.

The allegation was made as the former minister of social affairs, Ieng Thirith, 78, appealed for her release before she is tried for crimes against humanity and genocide for her role in the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge government. She is one of five top regime figures detained at the court, which was set up to try leaders of the movement which killed up to two million people through starvation, overwork, torture and execution.

'She regularly and violently, on at least 70 occasions, threatened co-detainees at the detention facility and also threatened guards at the detention facility,' prosecutor Vincent de Wilde told judges. The prosecutor argued that if Ieng Thirith was released before her trial, expected to begin next year, she could 'instil fear in victims and potential witnesses'.

In her previous appeal last year, Ieng Thirith said in a tirade that those who called her a murderer 'will be cursed to the seventh level of hell', blaming atrocities on Khmer Rouge ideologue Nuon Chea and prison chief Duch. Nuon Chea and Duch are being held with Ieng Thirith in the jail at the court along with her husband, former Khmer Rouge foreign minister Ieng Sary, and the regime's head of state, Khieu Samphan.

The bespectacled Ieng Thirith sat with her arms folded during most of Monday's hearing, delegating her lawyers to plead on her behalf. Her defence team said her outburst last year showed she was 'very vulnerable' and asked prosecutors 'not to make any inflammatory statements'.

Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot died in 1998. Final arguments in the court's first trial, that of Duch, real name Kaing Guek Eav, ended in November and a verdict is expected after April this year.