



Former Khmer Rouge 'First Lady' seeks release from war crimes trial

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Phnom Penh - Lawyers for Ieng Thirith, the former "First Lady" of the Khmer Rouge, called for her release from pre-trial detention at the international war crimes court Monday. Ieng Thirith, 78, appeared to struggle to recall the name of her husband and co-accused, former foreign minister Ieng Sary, when asked by the court.

"I seem to forget his name," said the former minister for social affairs, before turning to the court's security guards. "What is his name? Can you please help me?" Her Cambodian lawyer told the court she should be released to house arrest because there was little evidence to link her to the alleged crimes. He claimed she was not a threat to witnesses, would not try to destroy evidence and was not a flight risk.

Lawyer Phouv Seang Phat also criticized court investigators for using what he described as "a default policy of detention," saying they failed to comply with international human rights standards.

"[Her continued detention] is unjustifiable and constitutes an infringement of her human rights and cannot be considered necessary," he said.

But the prosecution said Ieng Thirith remained a threat as shown by a previous outburst in court and 70 similar threatening tirades in the detention centre, where she is being held with her husband and three others.

During her court appearance in February 2009, Ieng Thirith denied the prosecution's allegation that she was aware of the killings at the notorious Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, and claimed she had done nothing wrong.

"Don't accuse me of being a murderer or you will be cursed to the seventh circle of hell," the former Shakespeare scholar and professor of English shouted during that appearance.

Her lawyers ensured Monday that Ieng Thirith did not speak out of turn, even asking the court to muzzle the prosecution in its descriptions of her to avoid sparking a similar reaction.

"The prosecution's statements may provoke her to go against her own wish not to speak," one of her lawyers said in making the request that was rejected by the judges.

Prosecutors said the charge of genocide filed against her late last year constituted a strong reason to keep her in custody. They argued that she was a flight risk since she faces the possibility of life behind bars if convicted.

Ieng Thirith's request was the third heard by the court in as many days. Lawyers for Ieng Sary filed a similar request on February 11, as did the legal team for Khieu Samphan, the regime's former head of state. The tribunal is expected to rule on all three applications in the coming weeks.

Ieng Thirith, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan and former "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea are charged with genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, as well as crimes under Cambodian law for their alleged involvement in the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians during the Khmer Rouge regime.

A final decision on whether to prosecute or dismiss charges against the four is expected in September. Should the trial go ahead, as is expected, it is likely to begin early next year.

Around one-quarter of Cambodia's population is thought to have died from execution, disease, starvation and overwork during the Khmer Rouge's rule of the country from 1975-79. Its leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998 on the Thai-Cambodian border.