

The Phnom Penh Post

Countdown to Justice James O'Toole & Cheang Sokha July 23, 2010

Democratic Kampuchea represented one of the worst human tragedies of the 20th century. An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians – or a fifth of the population at the time – lost their lives through starvation, torture, disease, exhaustion from overwork or execution.

Hundreds of thousands more fled their homeland, becoming refugees. Those left behind still struggle with the trauma caused by their experiences under the regime – the constant fear, deprivation and loss of family – as Khmer Rouge leaders sought to completely dismantle modern Cambodian society, returning the country to “year zero” in one of the most radical and misguided social-engineering experiments in history.

More than three decades after the Khmer Rouge were driven from power, Cambodia is on the verge of passing judgment on the first of the five regime leaders detained by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, the United Nations-backed tribunal convened to investigate and prosecute those responsible for the atrocities perpetrated during Democratic Kampuchea.

Kaing Guek Eav, more commonly known by his revolutionary name, Duch, has been tried for crimes against humanity and war crimes for his role as commandant of Phnom Penh's Tuol Sleng prison, the regime's most secretive detention and interrogation centre, where at least 12,000 men, women and children – and perhaps as many as 16,000 – were brutalised and eventually exterminated.

On Monday, all eyes will be on Cambodia as judges at the ECCC are expected to

announce Duch's guilt for the crimes with which he has been accused; crimes that carry a prison sentence of between five and life.

This landmark verdict, and those that are expected to follow as the tribunal continues its work, carries with it the hopes of so many who suffered so much.

Visit www.phnompenhpost.com for the definitive breaking and multimedia coverage of this historic moment, updated as events unfold.