

Khmer Rouge verdict sought **July 23, 2010**

ANGKOK - THE first UN-backed trial of a top member of the murderous Khmer Rouge 'Killing Fields' regime will deliver a verdict next week that could bring some closure in one of the darkest chapters of the 20th century.

The Khmer Rouge's chief torturer and jailer, 67-year-old Kaing Guek Eav, is charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity for overseeing the deaths of 14,000 people as commander of Phnom Penh's notorious Tuol Sleng prison.

Better known as 'Duch', he is widely expected to receive the maximum sentence on Monday of life imprisonment by a joint UN-Cambodian court set up to prosecute the ultra-Maoist regime blamed for 1.7 million deaths that wiped out almost a quarter of Cambodia's population from 1975 to 1979.

Any lesser sentence, analysts say, could trigger public outrage and further dent the credibility of a snail-paced and financially draining tribunal that has already been tainted by allegations of corruption and political interference.

'Cambodians will lose confidence in this court if Duch doesn't get the maximum sentence,' said Pou Sothirak, a former Cambodian diplomat who is now a senior research fellow at Singapore's Institute of South East Asian Studies.

Duch, a former maths teacher and now a born-again Christian, insists he was following orders to avoid death at the behest of the late Pol Pot, a French-educated engineer who led the regime and sought to return Cambodia to a year-zero peasant utopia. -- REUTERS