



KRouge prison chief handed over to UN-backed court

July 31, 2007

PHNOM PENH (AFP) - A former Khmer Rouge prison chief was Tuesday handed over to the UN-backed tribunal in Cambodia, becoming the first suspect to be detained by the court, officials said.

Duch, whose real name is Kang Kek Ieu, was the only Khmer Rouge figure in custody ahead of Cambodia's long-stalled genocide trials, and had been held in a military prison since 1999.

Tribunal spokesman Reach Sambath confirmed that Duch had been formally handed over to the court, which opened last year.

Duch is one of five former leaders widely thought to be under investigation by tribunal judges. His transfer to the tribunal's detention facilities marks the most concrete step taken so far in Cambodia's efforts to try those responsible for one of the worst atrocities of the 20th century.

Up to two million people died of starvation and overwork, or were executed under the 1975-79 communist regime, which abolished religion, schools and currency, exiling millions to vast collective farms with the aim of creating an agrarian utopia.

These crimes were part of a "common criminal plan constituting a systematic and unlawful denial of basic rights," prosecutors said earlier this month after submitting their cases for investigation.

The names of those under investigation have not been made public, but prosecutors are reportedly also seeking charges of genocide and other crimes against former Khmer Rouge head of state Khieu Samphan, as well as regime leader Pol Pot's deputy Nuon Chea and foreign minister Ieng Sary.

Duch ran the Khmer Rouge's notorious Tuol Sleng prison, a former high school that was converted into a torture centre through which passed some 16,000 men, women and children who were brutalized for months before being taken to the outskirts of the capital and executed.

The prison, in the centre of Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh, has been turned into a genocide museum and is a popular tourist attraction.

Hundreds of mug shots of its former inmates are on display, along with torture devices and paintings graphically depicting the abuses inflicted on those imprisoned in Tuol Sleng.

Trials are expected next year in what many see as the last chance for Cambodians to get justice for crimes committed by the regime.

Pol Pot died in 1998, and rights groups and legal advocates are concerned that other ageing figures from the regime -- most of whom live freely in Cambodia -- will also die before being brought to court.