



Ailing Khmer Rouge Leader Falls Ill During Trial May 17, 2012

The Khmer Rouge's former foreign minister was admitted to hospital Thursday after suffering breathing difficulties during his atrocities trial at Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court, officials said.

Ieng Sary, 86, is the eldest and most frail of the three ex-regime leaders in the dock for their roles in the deaths of up to two million people in the late 1970s.

"He experienced some breathing difficulties," said court spokesman Lars Olsen, adding that the accused would remain in hospital in Phnom Penh overnight.

The seriousness of his condition was not known, Olsen said. Health concerns have long hung over the court due to the ages of defendants, but it is the first time that any of the octogenarians have been taken to hospital since their trial opened late last year.

Ieng Sary, who suffers from a number of ailments including heart and back problems, was not in the courtroom when he fell ill, but judges halted the questioning of a witness to instruct his counsel to check on their client.

Ieng Sary has taken to spending only the first half of the morning sessions in court before retiring to a holding cell from where he can follow the proceedings remotely.

"Mr Ieng Sary has had a cough for the past two to three weeks and it seems today he was having some additional problems with phlegm and swallowing," his international lawyer Michael Karnavas told AFP.

"We remain guarded as to his health, particularly in light of his age. We are simply not in a position to give an opinion as to the seriousness of his condition."

Ieng Sary and his co-defendants -- "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea and former head of state Khieu Samphan -- deny charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

Known as one of the few international faces of the secretive Khmer Rouge regime, Ieng Sary is exercising his right to remain silent during his trial.

His wife Ieng Thirith, a former social affairs minister, faces the same charges but she was declared unfit for trial last year after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and remains in detention receiving medical treatment.

The 1975-1979 regime oversaw one of the worst horrors of the 20th century, wiping out nearly a quarter of the population through starvation, overwork and execution in a bid to forge a communist utopia.