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## Rules set for Khmer Rouge trial

Cambodian and international judges announced guiding rules for a U.N.-backed genocide trial, clearing the last major roadblock to much-delayed trials of former Khmer Rouge leaders.

The Cambodian- and U.N.-appointed judges unanimously agreed to the rules Tuesday following two weeks of meetings, they said at a joint news conference in Cambodia's capital, ending six months of sometimes-rancorous disagreement between the two groups on how to move ahead with the trials.

The announcement Wednesday should please survivors of the murderous Khmer Rouge regime, who have waited so long for justice that many have doubted a trial will ever take place. Many also fear that the aging defendants could die before being brought to justice.

Some 1.7 million people died from hunger, disease, overwork and execution as a result of the radical policies of the communist Khmer Rouge during its horrific 1975-79 rule.

"Now that the rules have been adopted we can move forward," Kong Srim, a Cambodian judge with the tribunal read from the statement, which was both in English and Cambodian.

"These rules enable us to hold fair, transparent trials before an independent and impartial court," co-prosecutor Robert Petit, a U.N.-appointed official, read.

He said investigating judges will begin the judicial process as soon as they receive their first case from prosecutors.

"Although it's impossible to say when the first accused will appear before them (the judges), I think it's safe to say the process is going to get under way within the next weeks," Petit said.

Cambodia and the United Nations created the genocide tribunal last year under an agreement they reached in 2003.

The tribunal is an unprecedented hybrid, with Cambodian judges holding the majority in decision-making matters but needing one supportive vote from a foreign counterpart to prevail by obtaining a super majority, or a majority vote plus one.

It is operated under the Cambodian judicial system, often described by critics as weak, corrupt and susceptible to political manipulation.

Earlier hopes to convene trials this year were dashed by disputes between Cambodian and U.N.-appointed judges over the past six months, mainly about guidelines for trials.

Expensive legal fees imposed by Cambodia's bar association for foreign lawyers wishing to take part in the tribunal were the latest hindrance, before that issue was resolved in April.

With a \$56.3 million budget, the tribunal is supposed to complete its work within a three-year timeframe.

However, the judges were sworn in last July and the delays have meant that one year already has been lost without anyone even being charged.

A U.N.-appointed judge said in a recent interview that the investigation phase should begin within weeks after the rules are adopted. Arrests of potential defendants could also follow during that period.

Kaing Guek Eav, who headed the former Khmer Rouge S-21 prison, is the only one in government detention.

A U.N.-appointed judge said in a recent interview that arrests of potential defendants could also follow during the investigation period.

On Wednesday, both Cambodian and foreign judicial officials declined to give details about their cases or reveal names and the number of potential suspects.

"I'm very elated that the rules are now official and now the Khmer Rouge tribunal has a green light to go ahead," said Theary Seng, director of the nonprofit Center for Social Development, which monitors Cambodia's court system.

But she added that there are still deep concerns whether the tribunal -- known officially as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia -- will be able to execute its mission without political interference from the government.