



## **Ex-Khmer Rouge Leader Ready for Trial**

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The highest-ranking Khmer Rouge leader still alive denied any responsibility for the deaths of 1.7 million Cambodians during the party's brutal 1975-79 rule, saying unhesitatingly Thursday that he is ready to be judged by an international tribunal.

"I will go to the court and don't care if people believe me or not," Nuon Chea, who was the chief ideologue for the communist Khmer Rouge, said in an interview with The Associated Press.

He spoke a day after prosecutors at the tribunal examining the mass deaths submitted a confidential list of five former Khmer Rouge leaders they believe should be tried. Judges will decide whether to proceed with indictments.

"They didn't specify the names of the people, but I know I'm included," Nuon Chea said at his home in northwestern Cambodia near the border with Thailand.

Cambodian and foreign prosecutors submitted thousands of pages of documents to back their case over the mass deaths that resulted from hunger, disease, overwork and execution as the Khmer Rouge sought to impose an austere, agrarian society on their homeland.

Nuon Chea - known as "Brother No. 2" in the Khmer Rouge, the right-hand man to the movement's notorious leader, the late Pol Pot - has consistently denied any responsibility for mass brutality during the party's reign.

"I was president of the National Assembly and had nothing to do with the operation of the government," the ailing 82-year-old said. "Sometimes I didn't know what they were doing because I was in the assembly."

Cambodian scholars have disputed his claim, portraying him as a policymaker.

Prosecutors said the acts allegedly carried out by the five Khmer Rouge leaders "constitute crimes against humanity, genocide, grave breaches of the Geneva

Conventions, homicide, torture and religious persecution." Conviction could bring a maximum of life in prison.

"I had no intention to kill my people," said Nuon Chea. "The tribunal shouldn't rely solely on the law but on intention as well."

Former Khmer Rouge leaders have usually denied knowledge of large-scale killings during their rule despite a preponderance of evidence, most dramatically the mass graves found around the country.

They sometimes blame neighboring Vietnam - Cambodia's traditional enemy that invaded in late 1978 after a series of bloody raids by the Khmer Rouge on Vietnamese border villages. Hanoi's army ousted the Khmer Rouge and installed a puppet government, keeping troops in Cambodia for about a decade.

During the interview, Nuon Chea sat clutching a walking stick, the legacy of a stroke that has left his mouth slightly twisted, and complained of pain in his right leg. His wife served homemade fruit juice as he talked about the bloody past.

"It happened 30 years ago and it's very difficult to remember," he said. "Some of them (tribunal members) never experienced that. They weren't there - how could they know what was going on?"

Then he added, with a chuckle: "See you in court."

Marcel Lemonde of France, one of the tribunal's co-investigating judges, declined to discuss when the five suspects' names would be made public or when they might be arrested, though he indicated it could be soon.

U.S. Embassy spokesman Jeff Daigle said American officials "look forward to the day when identified suspects are brought to justice."

Ros Saroeun, a 53-year-old motorbike-taxi driver, reflected the satisfaction of many older Cambodians about the prosecutors' move against the former leaders. "I am delighted they will be brought to trial, because they have caused the death of more than 30 of my relatives," he said.

Pol Pot died in 1998 and his former military chief, Ta Mok, died in 2006.

The top surviving leaders are Nuon Chea, former Foreign Minister Ieng Sary and former head of state Khieu Samphan. All three live freely in Cambodia but are in declining health.

Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch, who headed the Khmer Rouge's S-21 torture center, is the only former senior official in government custody.

His lawyer, Ka Savuth, said he had been informed his client was soon to be moved from a military prison to the detention facility at the tribunal's headquarters, an indirect confirmation that he was one of the five suspects named by prosecutors.

He said Duch "welcomed the news and wished for his trial to take place as quickly as possible."