



July 18, 2007

Former Khmer Rouge leader says he is ready to face trial for genocide

The highest-ranking former Khmer Rouge leader still alive denied on Thursday that he was responsible for the deaths of 1.7 million Cambodians during the party's brutal 1975-79 rule, adding he is ready to face an international tribunal.

Prosecutors in the tribunal examining the deaths submitted a confidential list Wednesday of five former top Khmer Rouge leaders they believe should be tried, along with the evidence to back the charges. Judges will decide whether to proceed with indictments.

"They didn't specify the names of the people, but I know I'm included," former chief Khmer Rouge ideologue Nuon Chea told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview at his home in northwest Cambodia near the border with Thailand.

Cambodian and international prosecutors submitted evidence including thousands of pages of documentation and the locations of more than 40 mass graves.

"I will go to the court and don't care if people believe me not," Nuon Chea said. "It happened 30 years ago and it's very difficult to remember. Some of them (tribunal members) never experienced that. They weren't there, how could they know what was going on?"

Seeming unperturbed, Nuon Chea sat clutching a walking stick, the legacy of a stroke that also left his mouth slightly twisted, and complained of pain in his right leg as he spoke, while his wife served homemade iced fruit juice.

He said there were more police than usual stationed outside his small house since Wednesday evening's announcement of the legal moves in Phnom Penh, and he had to be careful about what he said.

Now an ailing 82-year-old, the former "Brother Number Two" in the Khmer Rouge has consistently denied any responsibility for the mass brutality that engulfed Cambodia

when the Khmer Rouge held power.

"I was president of the National Assembly and had nothing to do with the operation of the government. Sometimes I didn't know what they were doing because I was in the assembly," he said in fluent Thai. He attended university in Thailand as a youth.

"I had no intention to kill my people", he added, "the tribunal shouldn't rely solely on the law but on intention as well."

He gave a chuckle and added, "see you in court."

Marcel Lemonde, a tribunal's co-investigating judge who is a native of France, declined to discuss when names of the suspects will be made public and when they might be arrested, though he indicated it could be soon.

The prosecutors' announcement that they had submitted the evidence Wednesday set "the ball rolling in the legal process" of the tribunal, said Theary Seng, director of Center for Social Development, a nonprofit Cambodian group that monitors the country's justice system. "It is the first concrete and visible sign that the process will go forward."

"We are encouraged by the progress of the (tribunal) and look forward to the day when identified suspects are brought to justice," said U.S. Embassy spokesman Jeff Daigle.

Ros Saroeun, a 53-year-old motorbike-taxi driver, reflected the opinions of many older Cambodians, commenting that "I am delighted they will be brought to trial, because they have caused the death of more than 30 of my relatives."

A statement from the tribunal said the prosecutors - a joint Cambodian-foreign team - submitted 25 cases to the judges involving "murder, torture, forcible transfer, unlawful detention, forced labor and religious, political and ethnic persecution."

All five suspects were senior leaders, it said.

It said the factual allegations in the prosecutors' submission to the investigating judges "constitute crimes against humanity, genocide, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, homicide, torture and religious persecution."

The late Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot died in 1998 and his former military chief, Ta Mok, died in 2006.

In addition to Nuon Chea, former Foreign Minister Ieng Sary and former head of state Khieu Samphan live freely in Cambodia but are in declining health.

Kaing Guek Eav, who headed the Khmer Rouge's S-21 torture center, is the only former

senior official in government custody.

Cambodia first sought U.N. help in 1997 to set up a tribunal, but it took years of tough negotiations - with Cambodia saying it was concerned about its sovereignty - before the two parties signed a pact in 2003 agreeing to hold trials. Tribunal officials were appointed only last year.

Under the agreement, the maximum penalty for conviction for crimes falling within the tribunal's jurisdiction is life imprisonment.

Trials were originally expected to start this year but bickering between Cambodian and foreign judges over procedural rules delayed the process.