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Better late than never

After years of frustrating delay, the first of Pol Pot's henchmen is charged

Death allowed Pol Pot and his military chief, Ta Mok, to cheat earthly justice for the enormities of their Khmer Rouge regime. But at last there seems, after years of delay, a real prospect of bringing to trial ageing survivors from the ghastly regime's top ranks. On July 31st judges at a United Nations-backed tribunal in Phnom Penh brought the first charges, of crimes against humanity, against Kang Kek Ieu, alias Duch, who ran Tuol Sleng, the regime's interrogation and torture centre in Cambodia's capital.

True to the stereotype of the coldly meticulous death-camp guard, Duch is said to have kept detailed notes of his work, which may now be used as evidence. Just as predictably, the defendant, now in his sixties and a born-again Christian, insists he was simply obeying orders. Prosecutors hope charges will also soon be brought against four other Khmer Rouge leaders.

Some Khmer Rouge figures have been living in tranquil liberty since reaching an accord in the 1990s with Hun Sen, Cambodia's long-serving prime minister. He was himself a lesser figure in the Khmers Rouges. But there is not thought to be any evidence linking him to the crimes of their 1975-78 reign of terror, when perhaps a quarter of the country's people were either slaughtered or died of starvation or exhaustion. The prime minister rejects accusations of obstructing the tribunal, and insists he is keen for the trials to go ahead.

Ten years have passed since Cambodia first asked the UN for help in creating a special court. In 2003, after years of haggling over how much control the UN would have over it, agreement was reached to create an unusual hybrid. Unlike previous tribunals, such as those for Sierra Leone and the former Yugoslavia, the "Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia" has a majority of local judges. The judges and prosecutors were sworn in last year, but there ensued months of arguing over such things as court

procedures and the swingeing fees that Cambodia's Bar Association wanted to charge foreign lawyers taking part in the proceedings.

The prosecutors have compiled thousands of pages of evidence including statements from hundreds of witnesses. They are expected to argue that the Khmers Rouges' mass slaughter amounted to genocide—and indeed the Cambodian government uses Tuol Sleng, now a grisly tourist attraction, as a “genocide museum”. But this will prove contentious, since the regime's fanatical Maoists mostly killed members of their own race. If nothing else goes wrong, trials could begin next year. But if they drag on or prove unexpectedly complex, the tribunal's \$56m budget may prove insufficient, prompting further rows over money and perhaps yet more delays in bringing justice to the few senior members of the regime still alive.