



Cambodia set for historic Khmer Rouge trial November 19, 2011

The long-awaited trial of top Khmer Rouge leaders accused of genocide and other atrocities finally gets under way in Cambodia on Monday, but one of the four accused will be notably absent.

More than three decades after the country's "Killing Fields" era, a UN-backed war crimes court is set to hear opening statements in the case against "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea, ex-head of state Khieu Samphan and former foreign minister Ieng Sary.

Led by "Brother Number One" Pol Pot, who died in 1998, the communist Khmer Rouge wiped out nearly a quarter of the Cambodian population through starvation, overwork and executions in a bid to create an agrarian utopia.

Court monitor Ms Clair Duffy from the US-based Open Society Justice Initiative said Monday's opening would be a landmark moment for Cambodia. "It's a really important overview of what these people are alleged to have done," she said.

Missing from the courtroom will be Ieng Thirith ~ the regime's "First Lady" and the only female leader to be charged by the court ~ after she was ruled unfit for trial on Thursday because she has dementia.

Despite this last-minute drama, next week's proceedings are considered a major event in the still-traumatized nation's quest for justice.

Hundreds of Cambodians will travel to see the defendants in the dock, and events will be broadcast on television. "We really want justice to be served," said prominent Khmer Rouge survivor Chum Mey, 80. "The victims want the accused to tell the truth for the sake of history."

It remains to be seen how much satisfaction victims will get from the legal process, with all three denying charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide over the deaths of up to two million people during the regime's 1975-1979 reign of terror.

Amid fears that not all of the accused, who are in their 80s and suffer from varying ailments, will live to see a verdict, the court recently split their complex case into a series of smaller trials.

But during the four days of opening statements the prosecution and the defence will address all the accusations against them. "We will be setting out the roadmap for these cases so it's a very important day. It's a summary of the evidence we anticipate the court

will hear,” said international co-prosecutor Mr Andrew Cayley, who will be first to speak on Monday.