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Cambodian court to question ex-Khmer Rouge leaders

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — Three senior leaders of Cambodia's brutal Khmer Rouge regime will be questioned at a U.N.-backed tribunal for the first time Monday over their roles in the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million people when their movement held power in the 1970s.

The three defendants, all in their 80s, sat side by side in the court Monday as the judge opened the day's proceedings. The long-awaited trial began late last month with opening statements, and this week the court is expected to focus on charges involving the forced movement of people and crimes against humanity.

After the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, they began moving an estimated 1 million people – even hospital patients – from the capital into the countryside in an effort to create a communist agrarian utopia.

The defendants are accused of crimes against humanity, genocide, religious persecution, homicide and torture stemming from the group's 1975-79 reign of terror. All have denied wrongdoing.

They include Khieu Samphan, an 80-year-old former head of state who told the court in November he bore no responsibility for atrocities, and 85-year-old Nuon Chea, the group's No. 2 leader who has insisted he acted to protect Cambodia from invaders.

The third defendant, 86-year-old Ieng Sary, has said he will not participate in the trial until a ruling is issued on a pardon he received in 1996. The tribunal previously ruled the pardon does not cover its indictment against him.

There is concern that the accused could pass away before justice is achieved.

The Khmer Rouge's supreme leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998 in Cambodia's jungles, and a fourth defendant, 79-year-old Ieng Thirith, was ruled unfit to stand trial last week because she has Alzheimer's disease. She is Ieng Sary's wife and served as the regime's minister for social affairs.

The tribunal is seeking justice on behalf of the estimated quarter of Cambodia's population who died from executions, starvation, disease and overwork under the Khmer Rouge.

"This is the first time the accused persons will be asked questions in a public hearing about their role in the events that led to the takeover of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975

and about the policies of the Khmer Rouge," tribunal spokesman Lars Olsen told The Associated Press.

Olsen said the initial testimony will take several days. After the accused have been questioned, witnesses and civil parties will be also called to testify, he said.

So far the U.N.-backed tribunal, established in 2006, has tried just one case, convicting Kaing Guek Eav, the former head of the Khmer Rouge's notorious S-21 prison, last year and sentencing him to 35 years in prison for war crimes, crimes against humanity and other offenses. His sentence was reduced to 19 years due to time served and other technicalities.

That case was seen as much simpler than those currently before the court, in part because Kaing Guek Eav confessed to his crimes.

Chum Mey, 80, one of only two survivors of the S-21 prison, said he doesn't believe the three defendants will tell the truth about what happened in the 1970s.

"During last month's sessions we heard them say only that their regime was good and worked for the entire people," Chum Mey said.