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Anger as Khmer Rouge's Frail Elite Bow to Time, Not Tribunal

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BANGKOK: Only three former Khmer Rouge leaders still face prosecution for their role in the deaths of 1.7 million people after Ieng Thirith, 80, was freed on the grounds she is probably suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

The three men are likely to die before judges decide their fate at a troubled United Nations tribunal, partly funded by Australia.

Survivors of the genocide were shocked the tribunal decided to free Ieng Thirith, the murderous regime's most senior woman.

"There is no prospect that the accused can be tried in the foreseeable future," the tribunal's six judges ruled.

Ieng Thirith, the sister-in-law of the Khmer Rouge's leader Pol Pot and the regime's minister for social affairs, was accused of involvement in the "planning, direction, co-ordination and ordering of widespread purges" that led to the deaths of thousands of people.

A French-educated former Shakespeare scholar known as the Khmer Rouge's "first lady", Ieng Thirith had faced charges of crimes against humanity, genocide, homicide, torture and religious persecution.

A 71-year-old survivor, Bou Meng, whose wife and two children were executed in Phnom Penh's notorious Tuol Sleng prison, said he was shocked by the tribunal's decision, calling it a "mockery to the deaths of so many Cambodian people".

"Where is the justice for my dead wife and children?"

But Theary Seng, a human rights advocate representing victims, said there was no point trying an incapacitated person.

"The point is the [tribunal] is late in coming. The political foot-dragging and inertia caused this travesty of justice," she said.

The tribunal, set up in 2006 after years of wrangling between Cambodia and the UN, has delivered only one verdict: life imprisonment for the commander of Tuol Sleng, Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch.

The only others still facing trial are Ieng Thirith's husband, Ieng Sary, the 86-year-old former foreign minister; the former head of state Khieu Samphan, 80; and Nuon Chea, the 85-year-old chief ideologist and right-hand man to Pol Pot. Ieng Sary, who has a long history of medical problems, is in hospital. The other men are also frail and in poor health.

The tribunal, which has so far cost more than \$150 million, has been beset by internal bickering, resignations and interference from the Cambodian government, which is attempting to prevent any more Khmer Rouge leaders being prosecuted, including its naval commander Meas Muth, now in his 70s, who sent two Australian yachtsmen to their deaths in 1978.

Australia is the second-largest donor to the tribunal, but the federal government has made no comment about the tribunal, allowing Meas Muth to escape justice for sending Ronald Keith Dean and David Lloyd Scott, as well as thousands of Cambodians, to Tuol Sleng, where they were tortured and murdered.

During a visit to Cambodia in March the Foreign Minister, Bob Carr, praised the tribunal for convicting Duch and made only an indirect reference to political interference in its work.

"The independence of the judiciary and the [court] must be allowed to operate free from any external interference," he said.

The Maoist-influenced Khmer Rouge tried to turn Cambodia into a peasant utopia during its four-year rule between 1975 and 1979. The organisation executed hundreds of thousands of people and many others died from starvation and disease.