



Ex-Khmer Rouge leader Nuon Chea defends killer regime
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PHNOM PENH — The Khmer Rouge were not “bad people”, the regime’s highest-ranking surviving member said Monday as Cambodia’s UN-backed war crimes tribunal began hearing evidence in a long-awaited atrocities trial.

“Brother Number Two” Nuon Chea, seen as the chief ideologue of the brutal 1970s movement, was the first of three accused to face questioning from judges in the proceedings.

The trial is seen as vital to finding some justice over the country’s “Killing Fields” era when up to two million people died, and hundreds of Cambodians packed the Phnom Penh courtroom to see Nuon Chea in the dock.

“I don’t want the next generations to misunderstand the history. I don’t want them to misunderstand that the Khmer Rouge are bad people, are criminals. Nothing is true about that,” the bespectacled 85-year-old told the court.

Nuon Chea and his co-defendants — former foreign minister Ieng Sary and ex-head of state Khieu Samphan — all deny charges of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.

Led by “Brother Number One” Pol Pot, who died in 1998, the Khmer Rouge emptied cities, abolished money and religion and wiped out nearly a quarter of Cambodia’s population through starvation, overwork or execution in a bid to create an agrarian utopia.

The regime was eventually ousted from the capital by Vietnamese forces.

Nuon Chea cast himself as a nationalist defending his nation from Vietnamese aggressors who “always attempted to swallow Cambodian territory” and blamed the neighbouring country for the many deaths during the Khmer Rouge period.

“It was Vietnam who killed Cambodians,” the unrepentant revolutionary said.

Pol Pot’s right-hand man also pointed the finger at rogue elements, or “bandits”, who had infiltrated the Khmer Rouge before the hardline communist group came to power.

Khmer Rouge survivors at the court were dismissive of Nuon Chea’s version of the past.

“What kind of a patriot is he when millions of people were evacuated from the cities to face suffering?” asked Chum Mey, 80, one of just a handful of people to survive a notorious Khmer Rouge torture prison.

“We are not happy when he says Khmer Rouge were not bad,” he told AFP. “A crocodile must cry when it is tied up. He is only speaking to get his punishment reduced.”

Nuon Chea cooperated well on Monday, giving judges detailed answers about the rise of the communist movement in Cambodia in the 1950s and 1960s, which he said he joined to fight against injustice and oppression.

But the session ended early after the octogenarian complained he was “rather exhausted”. Questioning will resume on Tuesday.

Owing to fears that not all of the ailing accused, who are in their 80s, will live to see a verdict, the court recently split their complex case into a series of smaller trials.

In this first session, it will focus only on the forced movement of the population and related crimes against humanity.

Khieu Samphan is also expected to give evidence in the trial, the court’s second, at some point in the next two weeks. He said in his opening remarks in late November that he was a patriot who was unaware of the mass killings at the time. Ieng Sary has stated that he does not wish to testify.

Absent from the proceedings was fourth co-accused 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 last month because she has dementia.

In its first trial, the tribunal sentenced Khmer Rouge jailer Duch to 30 years in jail last year for overseeing the deaths of some 15,000 people. An appeal judgment in the case is expected on February.