



Ex-leader: Khmer Rouge atrocities are 'fairy tale'

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) — A senior Khmer Rouge leader insisted Wednesday he had no real authority during the regime's brutal rule of Cambodia and allegations he bore responsibility for its atrocities were a "fairy tale."

Head of state Khieu Samphan told a tribunal he was a figurehead leader who never joined key policy meetings in the radical communist government, which is accused of orchestrating the "killing fields" and causing the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians in the 1970s.

In his rebuttal, he said the prosecutors' opening remarks were exaggerations based mainly on unreliable old news reports and books. "You really want my head on the block," he said.

After the trial of Khieu Samphan and two other top leaders opened Monday, prosecutors have described the pitiless policies — focused on forced labor and abolition of private property — the Khmer Rouge imposed in an effort to build an agrarian utopia.

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 rule.

The defendants are the most senior surviving members of the regime: Khieu Samphan, 80; Nuon Chea, 85, the group's No. 2 and chief ideologist; and former Foreign Minister Ieng Sary, 86. They are charged with crimes against humanity, genocide, religious persecution, homicide and torture, but have denied wrongdoing.

The Khmer Rouge's supreme leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998 in Cambodia's jungles while a prisoner of his own comrades.

Khieu Samphan stressed the nationalist credentials of the Khmer Rouge, who first opposed French colonialism, then fought against a pro-Western regime and its U.S. backers and finally forced a showdown with neighboring Vietnam, Cambodia's traditional enemy.

He recalled that when he was young, communism gave hope to him as the best way for developing Cambodia, as it did for millions of youth for their own homelands. Yet the

picture the prosecution had painted, he said, "would lead people to believe that my youth was that of a murderer."

"You seem to want everybody to listen to your fairy tale," he said.

Prosecutors have described a litany of horrors, large and small, saying the Khmer Rouge sought to crush not just all its enemies, but seemingly, the human spirit. Defense statements have lacked that emotional punch, but their emphasis on politics and history indicates that will be key to the trial.

Khieu Samphan's French lawyer, Jacques Verges, dismissed the prosecution statements as similar to the novels of Alexandre Dumas, author of dashing adventure yarns such as "The Count of Monte Cristo" and "The Three Musketeers."

Khieu Samphan has said he has known Verges since he attended university in France in the 1950s, when both were active in student movements against French colonialism.

"He and I used to attend meetings of student committees against colonialism. That's what bound us together in friendship," Khieu Samphan said in a 2004 interview with The Associated Press.

Verges has defended Venezuelan terrorist Carlos the Jackal and Nazi Gestapo officer Klaus Barbie and is noted for a slashing, sarcastic courtroom style, aimed as much at discrediting the judicial establishment as getting his clients off the hook.

Khieu Samphan, along with Verges, reminded the court that intensive U.S. bombing of his country during the Vietnam War contributed to its misery.

"Can you imagine what my country faced after such bloody killing and war?" Khieu Samphan declared.

While decrying the case against him, Khieu Samphan added that he welcomed the opportunity to explain his role to the Cambodian public.

Khieu Samphan earned a reputation for rectitude and bravery when he was a left-wing lawmaker under a repressive royalist regime in the 1960s before joining his Khmer Rouge comrades in the jungle.

Even today, there is a residue of respect for him.