



First week of Khmer Rouge trials concludes December 9, 2011

In Cambodia, the UN-backed tribunal will on Friday complete its first week of hearings into the evidence against three leaders of the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge movement.

Week one of this long-awaited trial was dominated by testimony from the most senior living cadre, Nuon Chea, who was deputy to Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot for nearly four decades.

But Nuon Chea showed little inclination to take responsibility for the crimes of the Khmer Rouge.

CARMICHAEL: The man known as Brother Number Two for his deputy leadership role in the ultra-Maoist movement told the court the Khmer Rouge was not to blame for the two million deaths that took place during its rule of Cambodia between 1975 and 1979.

Instead, Nuon Chea told the UN-backed court, Vietnam was behind the country's catastrophe.

NUON CHEA: Everything was under the control of Vietnam, from the Hanoi headquarters, from the Ho Chi Minh headquarters. So these crimes, war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, were not (committed by) Cambodian people, it was Vietnam who killed Cambodians.

CARMICHAEL: Nuon Chea also put some blame on the shoulders of so-called bad elements, whom he claimed had infiltrated the revolutionary movement during the 1960s.

But the bulk of the blame, he said, lay with Hanoi, which he claimed had long harboured designs on Cambodia, and still did.

NUON CHEA: I don't want the next generations to misunderstand the history. I don't want them (to think) that the Khmer Rouge are bad people, are criminals. Nothing is true about that.

CARMICHAEL: It was vintage Nuon Chea, a man, historians say, whose antipathy towards Vietnam helped colour the Khmer Rouge's hatred of its eastern neighbour.

But his argument did not impress everyone in the tribunal's 500-seater auditorium. Some laughed out loud at his statements; others were angry.

Hardly a family in Cambodia was left unscarred by the Khmer Rouge's rule, when the

country was turned into a massive worksite, the population enslaved, and individuals reduced to mere function.

One of those affected was 62-year-old Lay Pheng. In 1975 he and his wife were forced out of Phnom Penh along with the rest of the population. The following year they fled to Vietnam.

What does he think, then, of Nuon Chea's comments blaming Vietnam for the mass deaths under its rule of Cambodia?

LAY PHENG: "It is not true. And in fact on the contrary, the Khmer Rouge even killed a lot of Vietnamese people and Vietnamese soldiers."

CARMICHAEL: Lay Pheng says every member of his wife's family died under the Khmer Rouge, and explains what he wants from the tribunal.

LAY PHENG: I want the court to sentence the Khmer Rouge leaders and deliver justice for the people that were killed so they can find peace. And it's not only me - other people also want this. It's the same for my wife and my children. We really want to see a judgement from this court soon.

CARMICHAEL: The three leaders face charges of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes for their alleged roles in devising the policies that led to so many deaths. They deny culpability.

The other two accused are former head of state Khieu Samphan and the foreign affairs minister Ieng Sary.

One of Ieng Sary's former aides, Long Norin, appeared as a witness over the past two days. He said foreign ministry staff worked in fear as colleagues were taken away for 'study sessions' - a euphemism for being arrested and then executed as spies.

But three decades on, Long Norin still seemed unwilling to assist the prosecution much in its pursuit of evidence against Ieng Sary. On numerous occasions he claimed he did not remember many answers to which he had given a written statement in 2007.

Long Norin's testimony was so varied that the prosecution wondered aloud whether he was now reluctant to testify against his former boss, something the witness said was not the case.

The court will hear further evidence in the trial of the three leaders next week.