



**Khmer Rouge genocide trial opens
November 21, 2011**

Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court has opened the trial of three top Khmer Rouge leaders more than 30 years after the country's Killing Fields era.

Judge Nil Nonn said on Monday the court "declares opened the substantive hearing" in the case against "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea, ex-head of state Khieu Samphan and former foreign minister Ieng Sary.

"All of whom are charged with genocide, crimes against humanity and grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949," the judge said.

Led by "Brother Number One", Pol Pot, who died in 1998, the communist Khmer Rouge wiped out nearly a quarter of the Cambodian population through starvation, over-work and executions in a bid to create an agrarian utopia.

Missing from the courtroom was the fourth 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 week because she has dementia.

Judges have ordered her release but she remains locked up while an appeal by the prosecution is considered.

With fears that not all of the accused, who are in their 80s and suffer from varying ailments, will live to see a verdict, the court recently split their complex case into a series of smaller trials.

New Zealander Rob Hamill says his brother Kerry was tortured and killed by the Khmer Rouge when his yacht was intercepted in Cambodian waters in 1978.

"The second trial is critical, really, to the success of the whole court and obviously with Nuon Chea, Brother Number Two, he was the man who ordered the death and burning of my brother's ashes, and the order of nearly 2 million Cambodian deaths," he said.

"This trial in particular is incredibly important for the victims - Cambodians or otherwise." Hundreds of Cambodians, including monks, students and regime survivors, came to court Monday for the start of four days of opening statements in the landmark case which is seen as vital for providing some justice for the still-traumatized nation.

"I feel very happy. I came here because I want to know the story and how it could have happened," said 75-year-old farmer Sao Kuon, who lost 11 relatives under the Khmer Rouge. Parts of the proceedings will also be broadcast live on television.

All three defendants deny the charges against them over the deaths of up to 2 million people during the regime's 1975-79 reign of terror.