



Khmer Rouge lawyers Slam PM's 'killer' remarks in trial
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Lawyers for a top Khmer Rouge leader accused of genocide condemn alleged remarks by the Cambodian prime minister describing their client as a "killer" whose testimony was "deceitful".

The comments, reported by Vietnamese media last week, "were a very clear statement about the guilt of Nuon Chea by a high government official," the defence lawyer Michiel Pestman told to Cambodia's UN-backed court, as hearings resumed in the atrocities trial.

"Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea and his co-accused, the former foreign minister Ieng Sary and the former head of state Khieu Samphan, deny charges including crimes against humanity and war crimes for the deaths of up to two million people.

Giving evidence last month, Nuon Chea, 85, partly blamed Vietnam, a country he said wanted to "annex" Cambodia, for the mass killings that occurred under the 1975-1979 Khmer Rouge regime.

During a news conference last week, the Cambodian prime minister, Hun Sen, was paraphrased by the state-run Thanh Nien daily as saying it was not necessary to respond to the "deceitful" words by Nuon Chea.

The prime minister also reportedly described Nuon Chea as a "killer and genocide (perpetrator) defending himself in an effort to evade the crime".

Mr Pestman said the comments required "a very strong response" by the court, which has long been dogged by allegations of political interference.

"It's not up to the prime minister to decide whether my client is guilty," Mr Pestman said.

"We request you to officially condemn these statements which prejudice our client and violate his rights to a fair trial and ask the prime minister to refrain from such remarks in the future."

The trial monitor Clair Duffy from the US-based Open Society Justice Initiative said it would be "prudent" for government officials not to comment about individuals under prosecution.

"This is especially the case in countries like Cambodia where judicial independence is still a very real issue," she said.

Led by "Brother Number One" Pol Pot, who died in 1998, the Khmer Rouge wiped out nearly a quarter of the population through starvation, overwork or execution in a bid to create an agrarian utopia before being toppled by Vietnamese forces.

Hun Sen, himself a former cadre before he defected, travelled to southern Vietnam last week to mark the 33rd anniversary of the ouster of the Khmer Rouge and unveil a monument there to the Cambodian resistance movement.