



‘Killing fields’ victims await Khmer Rouge trial November 20, 2011

Survivors of Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge regime held a remembrance ceremony in an infamous “killing field” Sunday, a day before a U.N.-backed tribunal begins a trial for three of the accused architects of some of the 20th century’s worst atrocities.

Relatives of the victims wept as they chanted and burned incense near a glass case filled with skulls at the Choeung Ek Genocide Center on Sunday. The memorial stands in a field where the Khmer Rouge executed people during their 1975-79 rule that left nearly 2 million people dead.

The emotional ceremony was held to allow Cambodians an opportunity to share their concerns and remember loved ones ahead of the trials of three of the Khmer Rouge’s surviving inner circle — all now in their 80s — on charges including crimes against humanity, genocide and torture.

“As the trial starts tomorrow, I want to remind the victims and ask them to push this trial to find justice for those who were killed by the Khmer Rouges regime,” said 80-year-old Chum Mey, who is one of the only two survivors from the notorious S-21 prison.

An estimated 1.7 million people died of execution, starvation, exhaustion or lack of medical care as a result of the Khmer Rouge’s radical communist policies, which essentially turned all of Cambodia into a forced labor camp.

Tribunal spokesman Huy Vannak called the proceedings beginning Monday “the most important trial in the world” because of the seniority of those involved.

On trial will be the Khmer Rouge’s chief ideologist, Nuon Chea, 85, former head of state Khieu Samphan, 80, and former foreign minister Ieng Sary, 86.

A fourth defendant, 79-year-old Ieng Thirith, was ruled unfit to stand trial last week because she has Alzheimer’s disease. She is Ieng Sary’s wife and served as the regime’s minister for social affairs.

The Khmer Rouge’s supreme leader Pol Pot died in 1998 in a Khmer Rouge jungle camp, where he was held prisoner after his former comrades turned on him. He had led the group from its clandestine revolutionary origins to open resistance after a 1970 coup

installed a pro-American government and dragged Cambodia directly into the maelstrom of the Vietnam War.

After a bloody civil war, the Khmer Rouge guerrillas took power in 1975 and all but sealed off the country to the outside world. They immediately emptied the capital Phnom Penh of almost all its inhabitants, sending them to vast rural communes as part of an effort to turn the country into a socialist utopia. With intellectuals and anyone too closely associated with the previous regime executed, an economic and social disaster ensued.

The failures only fed the group's paranoia, and imagined traitors — said to be working with the U.S., or Vietnam, the country's traditional enemy — were hunted down, only plunging the country further into chaos. Vietnam, whose border provinces had suffered bloody attacks, sponsored a resistance movement and invaded, ousting the Khmer Rouge from power in 1979 and installing a client government.

More than three decades later, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians still struggle with the trauma inflicted by the regime and the long-delayed hunt for justice.

The U.N.-backed tribunal of Cambodian and international judges, which was established in 2006, has so far tried just one case, convicting Kaing Guek Eav, the former head of the regime's notorious S-21 prison, last July and sentencing him to 35 years in prison for war crimes, crimes against humanity and other offenses.

That case was seen as much simpler than the current case, which covers a much broader range of activities and because Kaing Guek Eav confessed to his crimes. Those going on trial Monday have steadfastly maintained their innocence. The prison chief was also far lower in the regime's leadership ranks than the current defendants.

There has been concern that the top Khmer Rouge leaders, all aging and in poor health, could die before a verdict is delivered.

The first part of the trial will consider charges involving the forced movement of people and crimes against humanity, while later proceedings will focus on other charges including genocide.

"I'm so happy and I could not sleep last night when I heard these leaders were to appear before the tribunal," said 80-year-old Chum Mey, one of only two survivors from the S-21 prison. "We have been waiting for more than 30 years to hear these leaders' voice saying the true story of their reign that brought death to over a million people."