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Cambodia PM welcomes "Killing Fields" tribunal pact

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen on Thursday welcomed an agreement by Cambodian and international judges to open the long-awaited "Killing Fields" tribunal.

Cambodian and international judges agreed the basic rules on Wednesday for operating a special court to try Pol Pot's top surviving henchmen, allowing the tribunal to proceed in earnest.

"Cambodia will not have a bright future unless the problem is resolved and the trial is held and they are punished," Sen told reporters in Tokyo, where he is on a four-day visit.

Canadian co-prosecutor Robert Petit, who has been compiling preliminary cases against the top Khmer Rouge leaders, told reporters on Wednesday that he would lodge his first formal accusations with the court "within a few weeks."

"This is undoubtedly what all of the people of Cambodia have been hoping for," Sen said through a translator. "I really hope the trial will begin as soon as possible."

Around 1.7 million people are thought to have died during Pol Pot's four-year reign of terror, which was brought to an end in 1979 by a Vietnamese invasion.

Most of the victims of his "Year Zero" revolution were executed, or died of torture, disease, overwork or starvation.

"All the people of Cambodia are very much interested in how the international community will have the Khmer Rouge leaders take responsibility for having inflicted

huge damage and how it will hold them responsible to the people for the atrocities," Sen said.

"I believe the Cambodian people have the right to press for that," he added.

Pol Pot himself died in the jungle in 1998 in one of the Khmer Rouge's final redoubts along the border with Thailand. Neither the self-styled "Brother Number One" nor any of his comrades were tried.

The \$53 million United Nations-backed court has been plagued by delays and arguments between local and international legal officials, although the approval of the court's internal rules removes the last formal obstacle to its work.

However, no suspect will be appearing in court for at least six months.

The most likely defendants are "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea, former Foreign Minister Ieng Sary, former President Khieu Samphan, and Duch, head of the Tuol Sleng interrogation and torture centre in Phnom Penh.

Japan is the major financial backer of the court, which is expected to reveal the full extent of China's involvement with the Khmer Rouge.