

ASIA

Cambodia's Khmer Rouge Court Adds Mass Killings to Trial October 8, 2012

Cambodia's UN-backed court on Monday added a mass killing episode to the trial of three former Khmer Rouge leaders, amid fears they will not live long enough to answer for the regime's worst atrocities.

The move to expand the scope of the trial comes as ex-foreign minister Ieng Sary, 86, is in hospital with a string of serious ailments. Few tribunal insiders expect to see him back in court, lending fresh urgency to the proceedings.

The prosecution wanted three more crime sites to be part of the trial. But judges said they did not want to "risk a substantial prolongation of the trial" and approved just one -- the alleged killing of up to 3,000 former military officers at an execution site in western Cambodia.

"We're disappointed," deputy co-prosecutor William Smith told reporters.

Ieng Sary, "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea and former head of state Khieu Samphan deny charges of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity for their roles in a regime blamed for up to two million deaths in the late 1970s.

Their complex case was last year split into a series of smaller trials, starting with the forced evacuation of the population into rural labour camps.

Given the concerns over the health of the octogenarian defendants and as the court struggles to attract fresh funding, most observers believe this first "mini-trial" will also be the last, prompting calls for it to consider more serious allegations.

Court monitor Clair Duffy said the inclusion of the killings at Tuol Po Chrey execution site, where the Khmer Rouge allegedly murdered soldiers and officers of the former regime immediately after taking power in April 1975, was "a small victory for the prosecution and for the historical record".

"It does capture a bit more of the conduct they are accused of... of killing, targeting individuals on political grounds," said Duffy, who works for the Open Society Justice Initiative.

According to the indictment, the victims at Tuol Po Chrey were buried in mass graves, their hands tied behind their back and their bodies “covered in blood” from gunshot wounds.

“Witness estimates as to the number of victims range from 2,000 up to approximately 3,000 corpses,” the document reads.

Led by Pol Pot, who died in 1998, the Khmer Rouge wiped out nearly a quarter of the population through starvation, overwork and execution in a bid to create a communist utopia.

The court has so far jailed just one man – former Khmer Rouge prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch. He was sentenced to life in jail this year for overseeing the deaths of some 15,000 people.