

## **Cambodia Puts Khmer Rouge Reign of Terror on Trial**

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Thirty years after the brutal Khmer Rouge governed Cambodia, efforts to punish those considered most responsible for the deaths of nearly two million people have entered a new phase. A former leader of the ultra-Maoist group has just been charged with crimes against humanity while cases against four others are pending. But as Rory Byrne reports from Phnom Penh, doubts remain whether the Khmer Rouge tribunals will deliver justice.

A monument outside Phnom Penh shows some of the enormous scale of the killing in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. Almost two million people, a quarter of the populations, died under the Khmer Rouge from overwork, starvation and execution.

The ultra-Maoist group wanted to create a rural socialist utopia. It executed political opponents, the educated and ethnic minorities. Many died brutal deaths.

Kaing Guek Eav, commonly known as "Duch," was the commander of S-21 prison in Phnom Penh where thousands were tortured and killed.

He is the first member of the Khmer Rouge to be indicted in connection to the regime's reign of terror.

Almost 30 years after the Khmer Rouge were ousted from power, a joint international and Cambodian court is preparing to try those accused of being most responsible for the deaths.

Five former leaders are scheduled to be tried at a new court outside Phnom Penh, although more may follow later.

Civic groups warn that because Cambodia's judiciary is weak, the tribunal may be subject to political interference.

Attorney Theary Seng, whose parents were killed by the Khmer Rouge, is the director of Cambodia's Center for Social Development. "The concern, first and foremost, is political interference because some of the current leadership of the current government were members of the Khmer Rouge over a certain rank. There may be information that they do

not want to surface within the trial so there are concerns that there could be political interference and we have been given indications that there are."

Helen Jarvis is the spokeswoman for the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. She says that, despite their limitations, the trials are an important part of coming to terms with the past. "Certainly, it can't meet everybody's expectations, it can't tell the whole story, it can't do everything that Cambodia needs but it's a very important piece of what is required."

Civic groups see the tribunal as part of a wider process aimed at helping the country come to terms with its traumatic past.

Lawyer Theary Seng says, "The core benefits of a trial are becoming the ancillary benefits and the side benefits of outreach, engaging the Cambodian people, of disseminating information, of talking about history, of human rights abuses, of rule of law -- those issues are now becoming the core values of having this tribunal."

This annual re-creation of Khmer Rouge atrocities aims to help Cambodians remember the past and to heal the wounds of that era. Rights activists hope the Khmer Rouge tribunal will play another part of that healing process.