

## **Cambodia kicks off trial of top Khmer Rouge leaders November 22, 2011**

PHNOM PENH: Cambodians were bluntly reminded of their tragic history Monday as the trial began of three top Khmer Rouge leaders accused of orchestrating the “killing fields” in the late 1970s.

After Judge Nil Nonn declared the trial open, the prosecution started summarizing its case at the U.N.-backed tribunal – more than three decades after the Southeast Asian country saw some of the 20th century’s worst atrocities.

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 policies, which essentially turned all of Cambodia into a forced labor camp as the movement attempted to create a pure agrarian socialist society.

The defendants are old and infirm, and there are fears they won’t live long enough for justice to be done.

Monday, they sat side by side with their lawyers in the courtroom especially built for the tribunal, as the prosecutors began describing the scope of their alleged crimes.

Present were 85-year-old Nuon Chea, the Khmer Rouge’s chief ideologist and No. 2 leader; 80-year-old Khieu Samphan, an ex-head of state; and 86-year-old Ieng Sary, the former foreign minister. All three steadfastly maintain they are innocent. They showed little reaction as a litany of charges was read out against them.

A fourth defendant, 79-year-old Ieng Thirith, was ruled unfit to stand trial last week because she has Alzheimer’s. Ieng Sary’s wife was the regime’s social affairs minister. She remains detained pending a court decision on prosecutors’ appeal against her unconditional release.

The charges against the surviving inner circle of the communist movement include crimes against humanity, genocide, religious persecution, homicide and torture. Their leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998 in the jungle while a prisoner of his own comrades.

“This is the first [trial] of the Khmer Rouge leadership responsible for enacting a series of policies that led to the deaths of nearly 2 million people,” said Anne Heindel, legal adviser to the independent Documentation Center of Cambodia, which collects evidence of Khmer Rouge atrocities.

“There is hope that it will help Cambodians understand why it happened, why Khmer killed Khmer, and will teach the younger generation to ensure it will never happen again,” she said. Two-thirds of Cambodians today were not yet born when the communist group’s reign of terror ended in 1979.

Prosecution statements continue Tuesday, to be followed by two days of response by the defense. Actual testimony is scheduled to begin on Dec. 5.

Chea Leang, Cambodian co-prosecutor, recalled for the court the brutalities of Khmer Rouge rule, beginning on April 17, 1975, when they captured Phnom Penh to end a bitter five-year civil war, and immediately began the forced evacuation to the countryside of the estimated 1 million people who had sheltered in the capital.

She recounted the new social order established by the group: an all-enveloping system of forced labor, with personal property banned, religion, press and all personal freedoms abolished. It was rule by terror.