



Cambodia marks overthrow of Khmer Rouge regime January 7, 2010

A Cambodian official warned a U.N.-backed genocide tribunal on Thursday not to interfere in the country's internal affairs as the Southeast Asian nation marked the overthrow of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime 31 years ago.

Speaking to some 7,000 supporters, Chea Sim, president of the ruling Cambodian People's Party, said it would not allow the court to destroy the country's peace and national reconciliation. He said the tribunal must try only the most senior Khmer Rouge leaders.

The ultra-communist Khmer Rouge regime was overthrown by invading Vietnamese forces on Jan. 7, 1979.

The tribunal is seeking justice for an estimated 1.7 million people who died from execution, overwork, disease and malnutrition as a result of the group's policies during its 1975-79 rule.

The tribunal, which includes both foreign and Cambodian lawyers, has charged five senior Khmer Rouge leaders with war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

"We oppose attempts to use the chamber for ill intentions which would have an impact on peace, national reconciliation and development, which have been our hard-won achievements," Chea Sim, who is also senate president, said in a speech at party headquarters in Phnom Penh.

Some foreign prosecutors have attempted to bring more former Khmer Rouge members before the tribunal, but the government of Prime Minister Hun Sen has so far blocked such moves.

Hun Sen and a number of other senior government leaders held positions in the Khmer Rouge, and China, now Cambodia's No. 1 ally, backed the Khmer Rouge regime.

Casting a wider net might ignite tensions and problems for Hun Sen's government and offend the Chinese.

The tribunal tried its first defendant, prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, last year on charges of crimes against humanity, war crimes, murder and torture.

Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch, commanded S-21 prison in Phnom Penh, where up to 16,000 people were tortured and taken away to be killed. A verdict is expected early this year, and he faces a maximum penalty of life imprisonment if found guilty. Cambodia has no death penalty.