



Cambodia set for final arguments in KRouge jail chief trial

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PHNOM PENH — Cambodia's Khmer Rouge war crimes court on Monday begins final arguments in its first trial, bringing the regime's prison chief closer to justice for the "Killing Fields" atrocities 30 years ago.

Kaing Guek Eav -- better known as Duch -- has apologised for his role in the horrors of the hardline communist regime, which killed up to two million people. However, lawyers this week will argue about the extent of his guilt.

"We want to lead them back to the evidence to remind them again of the magnitude of the abuses and the reality of Duch's role in them," prosecutor Bill Smith told AFP.

For Cambodians, the controversial tribunal, established in 2006 after nearly a decade of negotiations between Cambodia and the United Nations, is the last chance to find justice for the Khmer Rouge's crimes.

Since his trial began in February, Duch, 67, has repeatedly used hearings to publicly ask for forgiveness for overseeing the murders of around 15,000 men, women and children at Tuol Sleng prison, built in a former high school.

He is charged with crimes against humanity, war crimes, torture and premeditated murder, and faces a maximum term of life in prison by the tribunal, which does not have the power to impose the death penalty.

Duch is expected to apologise again this week as his defence bids to lessen his sentence, however prosecution and civil party lawyers will each use a day of hearings to outline their arguments for a harsher decision.

A verdict is expected early next year.

Hundreds of Cambodians are set to attend the specially built courtroom on the outskirts of Phnom Penh for the hearing on Monday, which is due to start at 9:00 am (0200 GMT).

Duch will sit with the court's judges, lawyers and witnesses behind a massive bulletproof screen to prevent possible revenge attacks.

This week's proceedings will be broadcast live by all Cambodian television stations, court officials said.

Tuol Sleng prison was at the heart of the Khmer Rouge security apparatus and thousands of inmates were taken from there during Duch's tenure for execution at nearby Choeng Ek, an orchard now known as the "Killing Fields."

Led by "Brother Number One" Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge was responsible for one of the worst horrors of the 20th century, wiping out nearly a quarter of the population through starvation, overwork and execution.

Rising to power as a tragic spin-off from the US conflict in Vietnam, the movement emptied Cambodia's cities to take society back to a rural "Year Zero," purging city dwellers, intellectuals and even people who wore glasses.

The Khmer Rouge was ousted by Vietnamese-backed forces after a reign of terror lasting three years, eight months and 20 days, but continued to fight a civil war until 1998. Pol Pot died in the same year.

Duch has been detained since 1999, when he was found working as a Christian aid worker in the jungle, and was formally arrested by the tribunal in July 2007.

The court has faced controversy over allegations of interference by the government and claims that Cambodian staff paid kickbacks for their jobs.

The joint trial of four other more senior Khmer Rouge leaders is expected to start in 2011.

The court is also investigating whether to open more cases against five other former Khmer Rouge cadres after a dispute between the international and Cambodian co-prosecutors over whether to pursue more suspects.