



## **Cambodia set for key Khmer Rouge trial June 25, 2011**

**FOUR top leaders of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime are to go on trial for genocide at Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court in a case described as the world's most complex in decades.**

The trial, seen as vital to healing the traumatised nation's deep scars, has been long awaited by survivors of a regime that wiped out nearly a quarter of the population during its reign of terror in the late 1970s.

It follows the conviction of a Khmer Rouge prison chief last year in the court's first ever case.

The elderly defendants - "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea, former head of state Khieu Samphan, ex-foreign minister Ieng Sary and one-time social affairs minister Ieng Thirith - are to appear at an initial hearing on Monday.

They face a string of charges including genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes over the deaths of up to two million people from starvation, overwork, torture or execution during the regime's 1975-79 rule.

The genocide charges relate specifically to the killings of Vietnamese people and ethnic Cham Muslims.

All four deny the accusations against them and the trial, the tribunal's second, will likely take years.

"It's the most important trial that will ever be heard in this court," international co-prosecutor Andrew Cayley told AFP.

"There hasn't been a case as large and complex as this since Nuremberg," he said, referring to the landmark Nazi trials after World War II.

The initial hearing is scheduled to take place over four days and will focus on expert and witness lists and preliminary legal objections.

Full testimony from the elderly accused, who have been held in detention since their 2007 arrests, is not expected until August at the earliest.

It is the culmination of years of preparation by the war crimes tribunal, which was established in 2006 after nearly a decade of negotiations between Cambodia and the United Nations.

In a trial that lasted just over a year, the court sentenced former prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, to 30 years in jail last July for overseeing the deaths of about 15,000 people. The case is now under appeal.

The second trial is more significant and complex because it involves high-ranking regime leaders who reject the charges, as well as many more victims and crime sites all over the country.

"These leaders are not pleading guilty. They will be defiant and they will refuse to cooperate," said Anne Heindel, a legal adviser to the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, which researches Khmer Rouge atrocities.

Their health is another key issue. The defendants, aged 79 to 85, suffer from varying ailments and it is unclear if all will live to see a verdict.

Even so many survivors hope the proceedings will finally shed light on a "very dark period", said Theary Seng, founder of the Cambodian Centre for Justice and Reconciliation who lost her parents under the regime.

"The main question is why? Why did Cambodians kill each other?" she said.

Led by "Brother Number One" Pol Pot, who died in 1998, the communist regime emptied Cambodia's cities, and abolished money and schools in a bid to create an agrarian utopia before they were ousted from the capital by Vietnamese forces.