

Ex-Khmer Rouge foreign minister too ill for full-day trial sessions January 20, 2011

Phnom Penh - The defence team for the Khmer Rouge's former foreign minister said his advanced years and poor health precluded him from attending full-day sessions of Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes tribunal, a court spokesman said Thursday.

The lawyers for Ieng Sary, whose trial along with three other defendants was expected to start in the first half of this year, requested half-day sessions instead.

'Ieng Sary's age and medical problems prevent him from sitting in the courtroom for any extended period of time,' the lawyers said, stressing that their client wanted to be present during his trial.

They said the 85-year-old suffers from back problems and urological issues and cannot concentrate for long periods.

Tribunal spokesman Lars Olsen said the court would assess Ieng Sary's request. The court last week confirmed the indictments against the four surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge, clearing the way for their trial to start.

The other three defendants are 'Brother Number Two' Nuon Chea, the movement's ideologue; former head of state Khieu Samphan; and the Khmer Rouge's social affairs minister Ieng Thirith.

Legal teams for Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan this week called on the tribunal to release their clients ahead of the trial.

Nuon Chea's lawyers said the court had not explained its reasons for refusing their appeal against his indictment, and Khieu Samphan's defence team said the court had held him for longer than the rules permitted.

The four, who are in pre-trial detention, face charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity as well as an array of crimes under Cambodian law.

The four are accused of involvement in millions of deaths from execution, disease, starvation and overwork during the Khmer Rouge's 1975-79 Maoist regime. They denied the charges.

A demographic study by the tribunal estimated that 1.7 million to 2.2 million people died during that period, around 800,000 of them violently.

The genocide charge relates to the persecution of Cham Muslims and ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia at the time.

The accused are all elderly - aged 78 to 85 - and there are fears one or more might die before a trial is concluded. The movement's leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998.

Nuon Chea is also accused of controlling the movement's security apparatus, including the notorious torture centre in Phnom Penh known as S-21, which was run by his subordinate Comrade Duch.

At least 12,273 people died at S-21, tortured and condemned to death as perceived enemies of the regime. In July, the court jailed Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, for 30 years for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Both the prosecution and Duch's lawyers appealed the ruling, the tribunal's first. Duch's appeal is to be heard in the last week of March.