



KRouge trial faces delays over health woes: observers

August 24, 2011

PHNOM PENH — A major Khmer Rouge trial at Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court may not hear testimony until next year, observers said Wednesday, amid fears over the mental health of one of the defendants.

The trial against four top leaders of the brutal 1975-79 regime, which began in June, has stalled after a recent decision by judges to order a psychiatric assessment on Ieng Thirith, 79.

Anne Heindel, a legal advisor to the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, which researches Khmer Rouge atrocities, believes the process to determine mental fitness "is likely to take until the end of the year".

That view was echoed by a court official, who told AFP it is "unlikely the trial will get going this year" but asked not to be named.

The elderly defendants face charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity over the deaths of up to two million people, in the court's second and long-awaited trial.

Questions have long been raised over the mental state of the regime's "First Lady" Ieng Thirith, who famously lost her cool during a 2009 court appearance, telling her accusers they would be "cursed to the seventh circle of hell".

Ieng Thirith's lawyers have recently said they are unable to take instructions from her, citing mental problems.

Tribunal spokesman Lars Olsen refused to speculate on a start date but said the court would "shortly" appoint mental health experts to examine the ex-social affairs minister, who is married to co-defendant Ieng Sary.

Both Ieng Thirith and fellow accused "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea also plan to contest their physical fitness to stand trial at a hearing next week.

The prospect of more delays will upset some victims, who fear not all of the suspects, aged 79 to 85, will live to see a verdict.

"The accused and I are all very old now," said Bou Meng, 70, who was one of few people to survive a notorious Khmer Rouge torture prison.

"I urge the court to work on this case as soon as possible, so that justice will not die with the corpses."

In its historic first trial, the tribunal sentenced former prison chief Kaing Guek Eav -- also known as Duch -- to 30 years in jail last year for overseeing the deaths of 15,000 people. The case is now under appeal.

Led by "Brother Number One" Pol Pot, who died in 1998, the Khmer Rouge wiped out nearly a quarter of the population through starvation, overwork or executions in a bid to create an agrarian utopia.