



Long-awaited UN tribunal opens in Cambodia

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A United Nations-backed court in Cambodia has started a landmark trial of four senior leaders of the Khmer Rouge, the communist extremists whose bloody 1970s revolution killed nearly a quarter of the population.

While the long-awaited trial has been welcomed by victims, they are also criticizing the court for alleged political interference that could limit any further prosecutions.

Initial hearings opened Monday at the United Nations-backed trial of four surviving and highest ranking leaders of the Khmer Rouge.

Hundreds of people filed into the courtroom on the outskirts of Phnom Penh to see the long-awaited proceedings against the accused.

They are Khieu Samphan, then head of state, Ieng Sary, the foreign minister, his wife, Ieng Thirith, who was minister of social affairs, and Nuon Chea, known as "brother number two."

Among other charges, they are accused of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide for their role in the group's late 1970s attempt to cleanse Cambodia of "counter-revolutionaries" and turn the country into a peasant utopia.

The four elderly defendants, aged 79 to 85, all deny the charges against them. Their trial could last a few years.

Theary Seng is president of the Association of Khmer Rouge Victims in Cambodia. She has mixed emotions of excitement and sorrow in seeing them finally go to trial.

"We constantly have asked ourselves why? Why did it happen?" she asked.

"Why did these individuals, these Khmer Rouge leaders think that they can play God. That they can take the lives of my parents and the lives of 2 million other Cambodians? What gave them that right to experiment in this awful manner? And so, hopefully, the court proceedings will cast light on this very dark period by providing information, by chipping away at the question why? Why did it happen?"

Seng and other victims and lawyers have been pushing for prosecutions of more Khmer Rouge leaders, including surviving military and prison camp commanders. But the court

has resisted and been accused of corruption and political pressure.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, himself a former Khmer Rouge, has said he wants this trial, only the second for the court, to be the last one. He argues further prosecutions could lead to instability.

Dim Sovannarom is the officer in charge for the court's public affairs. He denies there has been any political interference.

He says since he started working at the tribunal for the past two years things have changed. He says in regards to the prime minister's comments he wants to say that the court is an independent institution.

The U.N.-backed war crimes tribunal was created to bring some sense of justice to victims of the Khmer Rouge. But its creation took years of negotiations with Cambodian authorities who wanted to control the process.

In its first case, the tribunal last year convicted Kaing Guek Eav, who ran the main prison and torture house of the Khmer Rouge. He was given a term of 35 years, which was reduced to 19 years.

During the five-year rule of the Khmer Rouge as many as 2 million Cambodians died from execution, torture, starvation and forced labor.

They emptied cities and locked up or executed anyone perceived to be against their extremist communist revolution.

Vietnam's communist forces ended their rule by invading Cambodia and pushing the Khmer Rouge to the border with Thailand where they held out until they dissolved in 1998.

The Khmer Rouge's top leader, Pol Pot, known as "brother number one" was purged from the group that same year, which is when he died.