



Tribunal a Model for Courts: Rights Leader

Poch Reasey

April 3, 2009

A leading member of Cambodia's civil society praised the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal for reaching its first trial, of prison chief Duch this week, saying the tribunal could work as a model for the country's widely criticized public court system.

The Khmer Rouge tribunal comprises three special chambers to Cambodia's court system, established only to try former leaders of the regime. The regular public court system, however, faces continuous outcries over political bias and bribe-taking.

The tribunal Trial Chamber opened its first substantive trial this week, putting in the dock Kaing Guek Iev, better known as Duch, for his role as the chief of Tuol Sleng and Prey Sar prisons and the Choeung Ek execution site.

Duch admitted to all 260 crimes in his indictment and asked forgiveness from survivors of his killing machine and the families of victims.

"Although everyone knows the defendant committed serious crimes against humanity, and serious human rights violations, the court still gave him full rights to defend himself," said Kek Galabru, the founder and president of the rights group Licadho.

The tribunal was demonstrating that no one can escape justice, she said, no matter how much time has passed.

"I think this court can be a model court for Cambodia when it decides to reform and improve its court systems," she said, as a guest on "Hello VOA."

Cambodia has a rare opportunity to find justice for the victims of the Khmer Rouge, she said, adding that she does not want the court to stop if donors stop providing funds.

The Cambodian side of the tribunal is facing a budget crisis. It was only able to pay its staff in March thanks to a \$200,000 infusion from the Japanese government. Allegations of corruption and mismanagement at the tribunal have made other donors reluctant to release funding.