



Tribunal charges 2 Khmer Rouge with genocide December 16, 2009

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — The U.N.-assisted tribunal trying former leaders of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge has charged two defendants with genocide for the first time.

Tribunal spokesman Lars Olsen said Wednesday the co-investigating judges issued the charges this week against the group's top ideologist, Nuon Chea, and former foreign minister, Ieng Sary.

The tribunal is seeking justice for an estimated 1.7 million people who died from execution, overwork, disease and malnutrition as a result of the ultra-communist group's policies during its 1975-79 rule.

Nuon Chea and Ieng Sary have already been charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as homicide and torture. They are being held in the tribunal's jail and are expected to be tried next year.

Olsen said they were charged with involvement in the deaths of members of the country's ethnic Cham and Vietnamese communities.

Some Chams, who are mostly Muslims, were among the few Cambodians to actively resist Khmer Rouge rule. The Khmer Rouge brutally suppressed the rebellions, which occurred in several villages.

Prejudice against Vietnamese runs high among many Cambodians, who see their eastern neighbor as predatory. The Khmer Rouge shared the communist ideology with Vietnam but had very strained relations with it, and mistrusted even veteran members of their own group with ties to Hanoi. They launched bloody attacks against Vietnamese border villages, which in late 1978 resulted in an invasion by Vietnam that ousted them from power.

The tribunal tried its first defendant, prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, this year on charges of crimes against humanity, war crimes, murder and torture. Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch, commanded S-21 prison in Phnom Penh, where up to 16,000 people were tortured and taken away to be killed. A verdict is expected next year, and he faces a maximum penalty of life imprisonment if found guilty. Cambodia has no death penalty.

Olsen said it would be determined later whether the two other Khmer Rouge leaders in custody — former head of state Khieu Samphan, and former Social Affairs Minister Ieng Thirith, the wife of Ieng Sary — would also be charged with genocide.