



Khmer Rouge tribunal indicts 4 senior leaders
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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) -- Cambodia's U.N.-backed genocide tribunal on Thursday formally indicted the four top surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime blamed for 1.7 million deaths in the 1970s, paving the way for the panel's long-awaited second trial next year.

The frail, elderly defendants, who have been in detention since 2007, deny any guilt for their roles in the radical communist rule during which about a quarter of Cambodia's population was either executed or died due to starvation or overwork.

The trial, due to start by mid-2011, will bring to the stand Nuon Chea, 84, the group's ideologist; former head of state Khieu Samphan, 79; former Foreign Minister Ieng Sary, and his wife Ieng Thirith, ex-minister for social affairs, both in their 80s.

Each faces four charges: crimes against humanity, genocide, war crimes and a combined charge of murder, torture and religious persecution, co-investigating Judge You Bunleng told a news conference. They will be tried together.

Several other major Khmer Rouge figures have already died, including supreme leader Pol Pot in 1998, adding pressure on the tribunal to expedite proceedings against the four indicted Thursday.

Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan have high blood pressure and have suffered strokes. Ieng Sary has a heart problem and Ieng Thirith suffers from chronic mental and physical illnesses, according to defense lawyers.

The indictments follow the conviction in July of the regime's chief jailer, Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch, on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity, torture and murder. He was sentenced to 19 years in prison - a term criticized by many Cambodians as too lenient.

Prosecutors are appealing for a longer sentence, while Duch has filed his own appeal seeking an acquittal.

Duch, 67, (pronounced DOIK) was the first defendant to be tried. He supervised the notorious S-21 prison where as many as 16,000 people were tortured before being executed.

Duch cooperated with prosecutors and the meticulous record-keeping at S-21 made his trial more straightforward. The upcoming trial of the senior leaders is likely be more complicated and politically sensitive because some current Cambodian leaders were once lower-level Khmer Rouge cadres themselves.

The devastation to Cambodia caused by the group's radical policies during its 1975-79 rule is beyond doubt. Towns and cities were depopulated in a disastrous agrarian experiment that shunned technology and persecuted the nation's educated classes. Perceived opponents of the regime, even within its own ranks, were ruthlessly purged.

But the opaque nature of the regime's workings may make it harder to establish complicity of the accused.

"Given the magnitude of the crimes committed" under the Khmer Rouge, the case will focus on "a specific selection of sites and criminal activities," the tribunal said in a statement.

Though the tribunal - more than 10 years and \$100 million in the making - has been credited with helping the traumatized nation speak out publicly for the first time about atrocities committed three decades ago, it has been criticized as well.

The government insisted Cambodians be on the panel of judges, opening the door for possible interference by current leaders - including the prime minister - who were once low-level members of the Khmer Rouge. It also sought to limit the number of suspects being tried - to avoid, some say, implicating its own ranks.