



Tribunal Parties Want Faster Prosecution at UN Court

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Lawyers for the civil party applicants at the Khmer Rouge tribunal called on the UN-backed court to speed atrocity trial proceedings for four jailed leaders of the regime, following the death of a key witness and activist, Vann Nath, on Monday.

The death of Vann Nath, who was one of only seven survivors of the Khmer Rouge's notorious Tuol Sleng prison, has underscored a lingering concern at the court, that it will not complete trials of senior leaders before they too pass away.

"Vann Nath's death reminds us of the absolute and urgent necessity that the trial in Case 002 start as soon as possible," said Pich Ang, a lawyer for one group of civil parties.

Civil parties, which represent victims at the UN-backed court, are a key component of the court's mandate to work toward national reconciliation for the populace terrorized by the regime's policies. Many remain concerned that the aging defendants Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith will die before they see their day in court.

"Seeing that both the accused and the victims are very old, then it's not suitable to prolong the time for a trial and [the court] must start as quickly as possible a hearing to find justice for them," Pich Ang said.

The court is currently preparing for a full trial of the leaders, which is expected to start some time next year.

Huy Vannak, a spokesman for the court, said judges are "pushing for the hearing as quickly as possible."

The desire by victims to see a trial come quickly was echoed this week by many in the international community, which funds most of the court.

In a statement Wednesday, the French government urged the court to come to a final decision "without delay" on Duch's verdict, which is under appeal at the Supreme Court Chamber. Prosecutors want more prison time added to his sentence, while his defense lawyers say he should be freed with time served.

"We owe this truth to victims, survivors and the whole Cambodian people," the statement said, referring to the need for a final decision.

Supreme Court Chamber judges said last week they expected a decision by the end of the year.

Vann Nath's death only underscored the time pressures on the court.

In life, Vann Nath was an ardent supporter for victims, and his painting and writings chronicled the atrocities committed by Khmer Rouge cadre. But he was also understanding of the court's work.

When Kaing Guek Iev, the Tuol Sleng prison chief better known as Duch, was given a commuted sentence of 19 years following a trial at the tribunal, Vann Nath said that Duch's own advanced age—67 at the time—meant he would likely not survive to see his release.

"I accept this punishment," he said, a position not shared by many victims who saw the sentence as too light, given that Duch was accused of overseeing the torture and execution of more than 12,000 people.

Still, Vann Nath had compared his time at Tuol Sleng prison as a "hell." He testified in Duch's trial, crying as he recalled his incarceration and the poor treatment of prisoners there.

"I felt very hungry at the time, and it was the most hungry I've ever been in my life," he told the court. "Even had they given me the flesh of a human being, I would have eaten it."

Only his talent as a painter saved him. In 1976, Duch ordered Vann Nath to paint a portrait of Brother No. 1, Pol Pot, from a photograph. He did well enough that he was spared the fate of most of Tuol Sleng's prisoners.

Chum Mey, one of the few to have survived the prison with Vann Nath, said Wednesday he wanted to see a final decision in Duch's case.

"If the verdict is released very soon, we'll have received justice very soon, too," he said, welcoming the support of the French.

Soum Sothy, a former prisoner of the Khmer Rouge in Siem Reap province and a civil party applicant for the court's upcoming trial, said he too wanted the court to move forward with its work.

"I have been waiting for more than 30 years, but when the tribunal was established, there were many delays," he said. "And the accused are getting old."