



Khmer Rouge victims seek new voice at UN tribunal

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Victims of the Khmer Rouge are holding a conference discussing the role they are playing at a UN-backed tribunal taking place in Cambodia.

Five former Khmer Rouge leaders have been charged with crimes against humanity. A first trial ended with accusations the special courts had shown little interest in the victims' testimony.

This conference is a chance for victims to air their concerns to officials before a second case goes to trial.

As many as two million Cambodians died in the late 1970s because of Khmer Rouge policies.

'Civil parties'

The Khmer Rouge Tribunal seemed to offer survivors - and relatives of victims - a unique opportunity.

For the first time in an international criminal process, they would be given a voice in court proceedings.

The so-called "civil parties" would have a similar status to that of the prosecution or defence.

But the first trial brought a series of disappointments.

The civil parties' rights to speak or question witnesses were whittled away as the process moved on.

Their lawyers complained that the court showed little interest in the testimony of victims and their relatives.

And some civil parties contradicted themselves while giving evidence - which suggested a lack of proper preparation.

The experience left some feeling that they'd been guinea pigs in a judicial experiment - and a number boycotted the court.

This time the civil party system has already been streamlined in anticipation. Tribunal spokesman Lars Olsen believes that should help to avoid a repeat of the first trial's frustrations.

He said: "There will be mainly one legal team representing the voice of the victim in the trial.

"But the most important thing will be that they will have a strong and consolidated voice in the trial.

"And there will be screening and better preparation for those victims who actually appear so they're not unprepared when they are testifying."

The Centre for Justice and Reconciliation has organised the conference.

It says the first trial caused a lot of frustration and nervousness - and that victims need more information about what it means to be a civil party at the tribunal.