

Monday, July 10, 2006

Prosecutors open Khmer Rouge probe

07-10-2006

PHNOM PENH (Agence France Presse)

Students look at the skulls in front of a closet at Tuol Sleng genocide museum in Phnom Penh. Twenty-seven years after the fall of the genocidal Khmer Rouge, prosecutors for Cambodia's new UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal have launched their probe of surviving leaders of the regime blamed for the deaths of up to two million people.

Prosecutors for Cambodia's new UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal have launched their probe of surviving leaders of the regime blamed for the deaths of up to two million people, a spokesman said.

The investigations got underway as Cambodia's former king Norodom Sihanouk rejected efforts to try only a handful of "old, sickly, unrepentant individuals," saying the money would be better spent fighting poverty.

International prosecutor Robert Petit from Canada and Cambodian prosecutor Chea Leang began their joint investigation to determine which of the former leaders should face trial, said tribunal spokesman Reach Sambath.

"Now we are embarking on the process of bringing former Khmer Rouge leaders to stand trial and to find justice for the victims," Sambath told AFP.

"But as they said last week, they need some time to collect evidence and documents before they issue the indictments... But they will try their best to do it as soon as possible," he said.

Sihanouk, who quit the throne in 2004 but still wields considerable influence, said in a message posted at the weekend on his website that he opposed the tribunal because it would not prosecute all of those responsible for the Khmer Rouge atrocities.

The former monarch has in the past both supported and condemned the tribunal, saying in 2004 that he would testify at the proceedings, but a year later calling the legal efforts a "comedy and a hypocrisy".

"I am against the special tribunal that has been established in Cambodia to try five or six Khmer Rouge individuals," Sihanouk's weekend posting said.

"With the tens of millions of US (dollars) reserved for the

'trial', one could provide immensely beneficial services for" impoverished Cambodians.

Seventeen Cambodian and 10 UN-appointed foreign judges were sworn in on July 3, marking the beginning of a long-awaited tribunal that should see some former Khmer Rouge leaders tried by mid-2007.

Petit warned Friday that it could take months to issue any indictments.

Prime Minister Hun Sen, once a low-ranking Khmer Rouge member, was reluctant to commit resources to the tribunal and the government was blamed for trying to derail the proceedings.

Up to two million people were executed or died of starvation and overwork in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, when Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge attempted to impose an agrarian utopia, forcing millions into the countryside.

Pol Pot died in 1998. Surviving members of the regime -- including his top deputy Nuon Chea, former head of state Khieu Samphan and ex-foreign minister Ieng Sary -- are in their 70s and 80s, prompting fears that they could die before facing justice.

Copyright 2006
Agence France Presse