

Cambodia Assembly Ratifies Khmer Rouge Trial Pact

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By Ek Madra

PHNOM PENH (Reuters) - Cambodia cleared the way for the trial of surviving members of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime on Monday, ratifying an agreement with the United Nations to set up a genocide tribunal.

The ratification by parliament of the pact, which took almost six years to thrash out, opens the way for the United Nations to raise the \$57 million it estimates will be needed for the tribunal, which will include foreign judges and prosecutors.

Many Cambodians -- few of whom did not lose relatives in the "Killing Fields" years from 1975-79 when 1.7 million people died -- are keen for the trials to start.

"What we have been waiting for for so long has happened today," Prime Minister Hun Sen, once a former low-level Khmer Rouge commander before abandoning the regime, told reporters after the vote.

All 107 members of the 123-seat National Assembly who were present on Monday voted to ratify the agreement.

"I want an explanation from the Khmer Rouge why they killed my relatives," said Prom Sovann, 46.

Another Phnom Penh resident echoed the desire of many fellow countrymen to see justice done.

"My dad was taken away and never returned. They accused him of working for the CIA while they were starving us," said a 53-year-old rickshaw driver. "I want to see justice."

But there was no immediate word on how long it would take to amass the money, assemble the judges and prosecutors and get the trials under way.

Foreign Minister Hor Namhong said on Saturday U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan had asked impoverished Cambodia, which says it does not have the money, to make a formal request for funds for the tribunal once it had ratified the pact.

Only then could the United Nations seek donors, he told reporters on returning from the opening of the U.N. General Assembly, where he met Annan.

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None of the leaders of a regime that emptied cities, tried to weed out the educated and execute them and killed people through starvation and overwork has faced the courts.

The surviving Khmer Rouge leaders are in their 60s and 70s.

The main power behind the regime, Brother Number One Pol Pot, died in 1998. Other leaders, including Brother Number Two Nuon Chea, then head of state Khieu Samphan and Foreign Minister Ieng Sary, are free.

Only two top members of the regime await trial -- military chief Ta Mok and Duch, the head of the notorious Tuol Sleng interrogation center, a former school from which few emerged alive.

The U.N.-Cambodia pact plans three years of trials that will involve more than 2,000 people, but Hun Sen has said his government can afford to supply only the venue, security, water and electricity.

Hor Namhong said he urged Annan to be quick about raising the money. Any delay "could bring a tribunal without people to be tried," he said. "I mean, all the old Khmer Rouge leaders could die, so I want Kofi Annan to pay attention to these issues."

Sean Visoth, executive secretary of the Cambodian task force working on the tribunal, said the government would send the formal request for funds soon but did not know when the tribunal would be set up.

"We want to start the trial as soon as we can," he told Reuters.

Sok An, head of the task force and chief negotiator of the agreement with the U.N., said 27 countries had expressed willingness to donate money.

"Some countries have already said they are willing to contribute their money through the U.N. trust fund, but at the same time we also need funds from donors to support the trial. Our position is flexible," he said.