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Deputy PM: KR Trial Will Start in 2005

By Yun Samean

The prosecution of ex-Khmer Rouge leaders will begin in 2005, Deputy Prime Minister Sok An told the National Assembly Tuesday, after lawmakers amended a 2001 law on the establishment of a UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal.

The government and the UN called for a 2004 start date almost a year ago, but 11 months of post-election political deadlock dashed that optimistic time frame.

"There are no obstacles remaining, because we have done everything already," said Sok An, who also chairs the government's tribunal task force.

As discussion of the proposed amendments got underway Tuesday morning, National Assembly President Prince Norodom Ranariddh told lawmakers that the time for debate was past.

"We already have ratified the agreement, so at this time we will have only questions and answers. We won't change the amendments," he said.

A handful of lawmakers asked for clarification of some points before parliament approved the measures with 96 votes out 98.

The adoption of the 29 amendments to the 2001 law—which pertains to technical aspects of the special court, such as structure, jurisdiction and procedure—came one day after the Assembly unanimously voted to ratify the 2003 agreement with the UN to try former leaders of the Khmer Rouge's democratic Kampuchea regime.

The government will send notice of Monday's ratification to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan today, Sok An said.

Annan is expected to then call on potential donor nations to fund the trials.

The ratified agreement and the 29 amendments still await the approval of the Senate and King Norodom Sihanouk.

France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs cheered Monday's ratification and reiterated its support for the tribunal in a press release Tuesday.

In Washington, US State Department spokesman Tom Casey offered a cautious welcome of the Assembly's progress, Agence France-Press reported.

"The Cambodian National Assembly's action is a step toward establishing a Khmer Rouge tribunal with UN support," Casey said Monday.

He added that the US supports a "credible Khmer Rouge tribunal."

France and the US belong to the camp of potential donors that has urged the UN to whittle down a proposed budget of about \$60 million to about \$30 million for a three-year tribunal.

Prime Minister Hun Sen and other government officials have pointed to donors' reluctance to fund the tribunal as an obstacle standing in the way of the long-anticipated event.