

Khmer Rouge Tribunal Witnesses 'In Hiding'

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A top genocide researcher says likely key witnesses at Cambodia's Khmer Rouge tribunal have gone into hiding amid fears of inadequate protection.

Documentation Centre of Cambodia director Youk Chhang says two former Tuol Sleng prison guards have left their homes, while three others are reluctant to discuss their role at the jail, which was the Khmer Rouge's main torture centre.

The guards have all spoken in the past with the centre, which is compiling evidence of Khmer Rouge atrocities.

But with the tribunal now under way to prosecute senior Khmer Rouge leaders, Youk Chhang says the guards, as well as many other former regime cadres, have become alarmed they might also be put on trial.

"People still have doubts over what level [of the regime] the court is aiming at," he said. "Many were part of the system, so they have a reason to feel uneasy about this stuff."

The researcher calls a protection program for both victims and perpetrators the "most serious" concern of the tribunal, saying "so far, I don't see any concrete plan coming out yet" from the court.

"It's important to quickly address the witness protection program," he said. Tribunal officials have acknowledged the lack of protections but say the issue is being discussed and a system will be in place by the time the first witness is interviewed.

Up to 2 million people were executed or died of starvation and overwork between 1975 and 1979, when the communist Khmer Rouge forced millions into the countryside in their drive for an agrarian utopia.

So far, two former cadres, Ta Mok and Tuol Sleng prison director Kaing Guek Eav, known as 'Duch', have been jailed on genocide charges.

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