



Genocide charge for Cambodia's K.Rouge ex-head of state Sue Se December 20, 2009

PHNOM PENH - Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court Friday charged Khmer Rouge former head of state Khieu Samphan with genocide over the regime's slaughter of Vietnamese people and ethnic Cham Muslims.

The 78-year-old has already been charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity for his role in the hardline communist regime that murdered up to two million Cambodians during its nearly four-year rule.

"This morning Khieu Samphan has been brought before the court and informed that the charges against him have been extended to include genocide against the Chams and the Vietnamese," the UN-backed court's spokesman Lars Olsen told AFP.

The tribunal issued genocide charges for the first time earlier this week against two other leaders of the brutal regime -- former Khmer Rouge number two Nuon Chea and foreign minister Ieng Sary.

Last month the court announced it was investigating incursions into Vietnam as well as executions of Cambodia's Cham minority committed by the 1975-1979 regime.

The court's investigating judges have also accepted domestic charges of homicide, torture and religious persecution against Khieu Samphan. Profile: Khmer Rouge's 'naive' head of state

His Cambodian defence lawyer Sa Sovan told AFP the latest charges had been expected, and he downplayed his client's role in the regime as important "only in name".

"I am not surprised by the charges... I have nothing to say about (them). It is their right. We will wait for the judges to decide," Sa Sovan said.

"If the court officials understand what justice is, I hope he will be set free," he added.

Estimates for the number of Chams who died under the Khmer Rouge range from 100,000 to 400,000, but it is not known how many Vietnamese were killed, according to Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia.

"We are satisfied with the charges but they should have been brought at the very beginning," Youk Chhang told AFP. "The Khmer Rouge considered the Vietnamese to be historic enemies, racial enemies," he said.

Led by Pol Pot, who died in 1998, the Khmer Rouge emptied Cambodia's cities in a bid to forge a communist utopia, killing through starvation, overwork, torture and execution.

But as the perpetrators were also Cambodian that mass killing cannot be classed as genocide, Olsen said.

Genocide is defined by the United Nations as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group".

Final arguments were heard last month in the trial of prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, known by the alias Duch, who was charged with war crimes, crimes against humanity, torture and premeditated murder in the court's first trial.

Khieu Samphan is in detention at the court, awaiting trial along with Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary and the former foreign minister's wife, former social affairs minister Ieng Thirith.

There are almost 240,000 Cham Muslims in Cambodia, mainly in the central provinces, making up 1.6 percent of the population in the predominantly Buddhist country, according to a recent survey by the US-based Pew Research Centre.

The tribunal, created in 2006 after several years of haggling between Cambodia and the UN, has faced accusations of political interference and allegations that local staff were forced to pay bribes for their jobs.

Cambodian and international prosecutors have openly disagreed over whether the court should pursue more suspects, while the Cambodian investigating judge has refused to summon high-ranking government officials as witnesses.