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Major Barrier to Khmer Rouge Trials is Removed

By Reuters

PHNOM PENH — The Cambodian Bar Association said on Monday it had lifted its ban on foreign lawyers at planned trials of surviving Khmer Rouge leaders, lifting a significant barrier to getting them started.

'We are making a lot of compromises, and that means foreign lawyers can join us in the defence section of the Khmer Rouge,' association president Ky Tech told Reuters after the first day of talks with the London-based International Bar Association.

We are working on how to assign volunteer lawyers to represent the victims of the Khmer Rouge and defend the regime's leaders,' he said.

The association's ban on the participation of foreign lawyers in United Nations-supported trials expected to last three years and cost \$56.3 million had cast doubts on whether they would go ahead.

Some diplomats had seen the ban as a way of delaying trials of senior Khmer Rouge figures now in their 70s and 80s and amplified doubts about whether the government, despite its public proclamations of support, really wanted them to happen.

But Ky Tech said only details had to be worked out now.

'We are meeting and working together because we do not want to obstruct Khmer Rouge trials. I am optimistic we can work together,' he said.

The agreement, however, does not clear the way to opening the trials of figures such as 'Brother Number Two' Nuon Chea, deputy to the late Pol Pot, the architect of the Khmer Rouge's 'Year Zero' revolution in which an estimated 1.7 million people died.

Foreign and Cambodian judges, who will have to work together under a complex formula designed to ensure judgments have the support of both, are half way through two weeks of talks on agreeing on the nuts and bolts of how the trials will be run.

Tribunal spokesman Reach Sambath said they had made substantial progress in their third attempt to agree, but refused to provide any details.

'Discussions are still going on and we cannot provide details,' he said. 'But what we can tell you is that a lot of progress has been made over the past few days.'

Disagreements ranged from the admissibility of evidence to witness protection, even to the height of the judges' chairs, and the trials cannot begin until they are ironed out.

Other aged leaders due to face trial are former head of state Khieu Samphan and ex-foreign minister Ieng Sary.

They are living free. The most senior Khmer Rouge in detention is Duch, head of the notorious Tuol Sleng interrogation centre in Phnom Penh where at least 14,000 people are thought to have been tortured and executed.

During the four years the Khmer Rouge were in power, about a quarter of the country's population was executed or died of hunger or disease.

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