



## **Khmer Rouge court calls government witnesses**

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Cambodia's UN-backed Khmer Rouge war crimes court has summoned six top government and legislative officials as witnesses against leaders of the late 1970s regime, said documents released Wednesday.

In a move opposed by the Cambodian government, letters signed by the French investigating judge called on the officials to testify in the second case against former Khmer Rouge leaders for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Current senate president Chea Sim, national assembly president Heng Samrin, foreign minister Hor Namhong, finance minister Keat Chhon and senators Sim Ka and Ouk Bunchhoeun were each "asked for a hearing as a witness," said the letters.

They will have to give testimony to an investigating judge of the tribunal, which was created in 2006 to try leading members of the regime.

"Except for individuals who volunteer to go, the government's position is no to this even if they are called as witnesses," government spokesman Khieu Kanharith told AFP Wednesday.

He said that foreign officials involved in the tribunal "can pack their clothes and return home" if they are not satisfied.

However Heather Ryan, court monitor for the Open Society Justice Initiative, said the move to release the court documents was an "important step" which might make members of government feel obliged to cooperate with the tribunal.

"The fact that the letters are public hopefully increases the chances they will comply with the summonses," Ryan said.

Critics of Cambodia's administration have previously alleged that it has interfered in the tribunal to protect former regime members now in government.

The court's second case is expected to try detained former Khmer Rouge ideologue Nuon Chea, head of state Khieu Samphan, foreign minister Ieng Sary and his wife, minister of social affairs Ieng Thirith.

As the court has sought to investigate other suspects, Prime Minister Hun Sen has warned further prosecutions could plunge Cambodia back into civil war. But critics say there is no risk of more fighting after over a decade of peace.

Final arguments in the court's first trial of prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, known by the alias Duch, are scheduled for late next month.

He has used the proceedings to accept responsibility and apologise for overseeing the execution of more than 15,000 people at the main Khmer Rouge jail, known as Tuol Sleng.

Led by Pol Pot, who died in 1998, the Khmer Rouge emptied Cambodia's cities in a bid to forge a communist utopia, resulting in the deaths of up to two million people from starvation, overwork and torture.