

Cambodia's legislature bars government from pardoning Khmer Rouge

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) - Legislators on Tuesday approved laws barring the Cambodian government from pardoning Khmer Rouge suspects, one day after ratifying a landmark U.N.-backed plan to set up a tribunal to prosecute surviving leaders of the murderous 1970s regime.

The National Assembly also endorsed other changes to Cambodian law enabling the tribunal, including exempting the proposed two-tier tribunal from the country's three-tiered court system - with lower, appeals and supreme courts - as a way of cutting costs.

"We have fulfilled this supreme task to seek justice for the victims and contribute to the cause of the entire humanity, which is to prevent the return of genocide," Deputy Prime Minister Sok An, Cambodia's chief tribunal negotiator, told reporters after the 96-2 vote.

The assembly on Monday ratified an agreement with the United Nations on the Khmer Rouge tribunal, ending more than six years of negotiations and delays and clearing a major hurdle toward bringing to justice members of the regime blamed for the deaths of nearly 2 million people.

The Khmer Rouge, who ruled the country from 1975-79, are believed responsible for the deaths of at least 1.7 million of their countrymen from starvation, disease, overwork and execution. None of the regime's top leaders has been brought to justice.

The movement's chief, Pol Pot, died in 1998. Several of his top lieutenants, aging and infirm, still live freely in Cambodia.

Independent human rights experts suggest that about a dozen major leaders should be indicted by the tribunal but no official decisions have been made. It remained unclear when proceedings would start, and questions remain about how the tribunal will be funded.

Under the legislation passed Tuesday, the tribunal also would have the authority to retroactively decide on the "scope" of pardons granted before the tribunal law was adopted, in a measure apparently aimed at the pardon of Ieng Sary, the former Khmer Rouge foreign minister.

Ieng Sary came into the government's good graces after leading a mass defection of rebel Khmer Rouge troops to the government side in 1996. He was pardoned by King Norodom Sihanouk on the request of the two men who were co-prime ministers at the time: Hun Sen and Prince Norodom Ranariddh.

The agreement with the United Nations still needs the expected

approval of Cambodia's Senate and head of state.

News of the ratification has caused no stir in the capital. Many Cambodians are too young to remember the horror of the Khmer Rouge years, and most people must concentrate on earning a living from the few opportunities available in this poverty-stricken nation.

It took five years of tough negotiations to reach agreement with the United Nations in June last year. Then ratification was delayed, largely because the country had no functioning legislature during an 11-month political crisis that followed inconclusive elections in 2003.