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Cambodian gov't to hurry Khmer Rouge trial

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, AP

Cambodia's Cabinet on Friday agreed to speed up measures to establish a U.N.-assisted tribunal to try former leaders of the Khmer Rouge for crimes against humanity.

Cabinet spokesman Penn Thol said paperwork and other formalities of the pact signed with the United Nations would be submitted to the National Assembly for review and ratification in the near future.

Ratification of the agreement had been delayed almost a year while Cambodia failed to establish a working government and legislature after an inconclusive July 2003 general election. A new government was finally formed late last month.

"Since we have lost a lot of time already, we have to hurry up," said Penn Thol.

The Khmer Rouge regime ruled Cambodia between 1975-79 with extremist communist policies that resulted in the death of some 1.7 million of their countrymen from starvation, disease, overwork and execution.

None of the group's leaders have faced justice for their crimes, though many, aging and infirm, live freely in Cambodia after the remnants of their movement collapsed more than five years ago. Their chief, Pol Pot, died in 1998.

There have been concerns among human rights groups that some of the group's leaders might escape prosecution, because they are past, present or potential political allies of Prime Minister Hun Sen, who exercises virtually unchallenged control over the country's administration.

However, Penn Thol on Friday gave an assurance that no one would be exempt from justice at the trials, which would have joint teams of Cambodian and foreign prosecutors and judges.

"Cambodia will not seek pardon or forgiveness for any person who might face investigation or prosecution for the crimes stated in this agreement," he said after the Cabinet meeting.

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