

Cambodian court opens Khmer Rouge trial

AFP, Phnom Penh

Four top Khmer Rouge leaders went on trial at Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court yesterday for genocide and other atrocities during the hardline communist regime's reign of terror in the 1970s.

The case, described as the most complex since the Nazi trials after World War II, has been long awaited by victims of the totalitarian movement, which wiped out nearly a quarter of the population.

The four face charges including genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes over the deaths of up to two million people from starvation, overwork, torture or execution during the Khmer Rouge's brutal 1975-79 rule.

All four suspects deny the accusations, including the genocide charges, which relate specifically to the murders of Vietnamese people



and ethnic Cham Muslims.

Nuon Chea, the right-hand man of late Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot, left the hearing after only half an hour in protest at the handling of the investigation and legal proceedings.

"I am not happy with this hearing," said Nuon Chea, 84, before returning to the detention facility. The defendants are allowed to be absent if they refuse to cooperate.

Former social affairs minister Ieng Thirith and her husband, ex-

foreign minister Ieng Sary, were later excused on health grounds, leaving only one-time head of state Khieu Samphan in the dock for the duration of the hearing.

The accused, all in their late 70s or 80s, suffer from varying ailments and there are fears that not all of them will live to see a verdict.

The complex proceedings, expected to take years, are seen as vital to healing the traumatised nation's deep scars.

"This trial is very important to find justice for those who died and for the survivors," said Khem Nareth, 56, who lost his mother and brother under the regime.

At the end of the trial's first day, victims expressed satisfaction.

"We are pleased with the court's proceedings today. We are very happy," said 80-year-old Chum Mey, one of just a handful of people to survive a notorious Khmer Rouge prison.

Trial monitor Anne Heindel, a legal adviser to the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, said the hearing had provided "a snapshot" of what the trial would be like, "with health concerns being an overarching issue".

A main topic of debate on yesterday was whether Ieng Sary's 1979 death sentence in absentia for genocide, in what was widely regarded as a sham trial, constituted double jeopardy.



Thousands of Libyans celebrate in rebel-held Misrata's Freedom Square after receiving the news of an arrest warrant issued against Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi by the International Criminal Court yesterday.

LIBYA CRISIS

Fierce fighting close to Tripoli

BBC ONLINE

Rebel forces in Libya have clashed with troops loyal to Col Muammar Gaddafi about 80km (50 miles) south-west of the capital, Tripoli.

A rebel spokesman in the Nafusa mountains said there had been heavy fighting on the outskirts of the strategic town of Bir al-Ghanam.

The rebels told the BBC they were making a push for Tripoli.

Meanwhile, the International Criminal Court judges issued arrest warrants for Gaddafi and two of his closest allies for crimes against humanity committed against opponents of his regime, a judge said.

The international military operation in Libya entered its 100th day on yesterday, with the rebels still struggling to take advantage of coalition air strikes on Col Gaddafi's infrastructure.

The Libyan news agency reported fresh strikes on Tripoli overnight.

The rebels control the east of the country as well as pockets of western Libya, including the Nafusa mountains.

Guma el-Gamaty, a spokesman for the

rebels' National Transitional Council (NTC), told AP news agency that Bir al-Ghanam - the focus of the latest fighting - was important as it was barely 30km (18 miles) south of Zawiyah, a western gateway to Tripoli.

Opposition fighters seized Zawiyah in March before government troops drove the rebels out of the oil-refinery city. Fighting again broke out there this month.

The BBC's Mark Doyle, who is in the village of Bir Ayad near Bir al-Ghanam, says Sunday's fighting began when government forces tried to cut off the rebels by attacking from behind.

Clashes continued in the distance, where the boom of artillery, the rattle of automatic gunfire and the occasional rumble of Nato jets could be heard, he says.

A medic said two rebels had died in the battle. The rebels said government forces suffered far greater casualties, although that cannot be confirmed.

The rebels came down into the plains from the Nafusa mountains in early June, adds our correspondent.

But they have met strong resistance from Col Gaddafi's forces.

TUNISIA UNREST

Islamists pull out of reform commission

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia's Islamist movement Ennahda (Renaissance), has definitively pulled out of a national commission tasked with bringing in political reforms, its leader Rached Ghannouchi said yesterday.

The commission "believes it has a popular legitimacy, when it hasn't," Ghannouchi told a press conference in Tunis, reproaching the panel for its "condescension."

The reform panel was set up in February after the popular uprising that ousted president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, with a brief to pave the way for democratic change in the north African country.

Ennahda suspended its participation in the commission's work last week and then announced that the decision could become definitive.

The Islamist movement, which was finally legalised at the start of early March after three decades as a banned opposition group, first pulled out of the reform panel at the end of May after a dispute over the date for elections, which had initially been set for July 24.

The reform panel, or "high instance for the achievement of the goals of the revolution, political reform and a democratic transition," is headed by Yadh Ben Achour, and has set itself far-reaching aims.

Pak warlord 'defects from Taliban'

AFP, Peshawar

A Pakistani Taliban warlord who claims to control hundreds of foot soldiers said yesterday he had broken with the militia and would form his own anti-American group along the Afghan border.

Fazal Saeed described himself as the leader of Pakistan's umbrella Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) faction in the tribal district of Kurram, but said he had run out of patience with the network for killing civilians.

TTP has claimed a series of high-profile attacks in the nearly two months since US troops killed Osama bin Laden.

Hinting at a possible split in Pakistan's deadliest militant outfit, Saeed said he had decided to form a new organisation--Tehreek-e-Taliban Islami.

28 killed in Bolivia bus plunge

AFP, La Paz

A public bus careened off a winding road and plunged some 100 meters into a ravine early yesterday in southern Bolivia, killing at least 28 people, and leaving 10 injured, officials said.

An investigation has been launched into the crash, said transport officials in the city of Tarija, 570 miles (919 km) from the capital, but initial findings were that poor visibility was a major factor in the accident.

The bus, reportedly carrying some 70 passengers -- well over the legal limit -- was en route from the border town of Villazon to Tarija.

Ranjan Mathai next Indian foreign secretary

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Career diplomat Ranjan Mathai, who had once handled India's relations with Bangladesh in 1990s, will be the country's next Foreign Secretary succeeding Nirupama Rao, it was announced yesterday.

A 1974-batch IFS officer, 59-year-old Mathai will assume charge on August one and will have a two-year term, official spokesperson of External Affairs Ministry Vishnu Prakash said.

Mathai, who did his MA in Political Science, has served in Indian missions in Vienna, Colombo, Washington, Tehran and Brussels.

As Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi between January 1995 to February 1998, he headed the division dealing with India's relations



Ranjan Mathai

give a leg up to relations between the two countries.

He also served as Indian Ambassador to Israel from February 1998 to June 2001 and Qatar from August 2001 to July 2005 and held the post of Deputy High Commissioner in India's mission in the UK from August 2005 to January 2007.

Rao, whose tenure ends on July 31, has been appointed as India's ambassador to the United States.

with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Maldives.

Mathai's appointment as India's top diplomat comes at a time when preparations are on for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's much-awaited visit to Bangladesh likely in September this year, an event which is expected to

Israel approves plan to repel new Gaza flotilla

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's security cabinet yesterday ordered the navy to stop an international aid flotilla from breaching a naval blockade on the Gaza Strip but to avoid clashes with activists on board.

"Members of the (security) cabinet decided today following a debate on the flotilla that the state of Israel will be determined in stopping the flotilla's arrival in Gaza," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said in a statement.

But forces would be ordered to do so "with minimal confrontation, as far as possible, with those on board the ships," it said without giving further details.

Vice Prime Minister Moshe Yaalon also said ministers had decided to rethink a threat to punish foreign journalists participating in the convoy by barring them from entering Israel for up to 10 years.

"The prime minister heard about the decision in the media, like I did, and was surprised by it. We are going to study the issue and reconsider the decision," Yaalon told public radio.

The closed-door meeting was the second session on the flotilla in as many days.

On Sunday, ministers in the forum were briefed on the military's preparations for the 10-ship convoy which is expected to set sail from Greece later this week.

Jackson 'Thriller' jacket sells for \$1.8 million

AFP, Los Angeles

The red and black leather jacket worn by Michael Jackson in his "Thriller" video went under the hammer for \$1.8 million on Sunday, a day after the second anniversary of the pop icon's death.

The jacket, which fetched several times its estimate of between \$200,000 and \$400,000, has "Love Michael Jackson" written on the sleeve, and a dedication in the lining to his long-time costume designers, to whom he gave it.

The buyer was identified as Milton Verret, a commodities trader from Austin Texas, who plans to have the jacket tour and be displayed at children's hospitals around the globe to raise money for their children's charities.

The auctioneer described the jacket as "among the most recognizable and famous garments of the 20th century," saying it sparked a 1980s fashion craze



when it was copied and sold to adoring Jackson fans worldwide.

"The black and red style of the jacket became so identifiable with Jackson's groundbreaking (video) that he continued to use jackets of the same design when performing the song 'Thriller' for the duration of his career," it said.

The jacket is one of two which Jackson used during the ghoulishly iconic video, the other being on display in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio.

In the 14-minute video from 1983, a graveyard full of zombies come to life, and join Jackson in a morbidly spectacular dance routine which has become an icon of popular culture.

Jackson gave the jacket to his longtime costume designers Dennis Tompkins and Michael Bush, asking them to use it as a reference for subsequent concert versions of the "Thriller" jacket he would use during his career.

Dissidents openly call for democracy in Syria

AFP, Damascus

More than 100 dissidents heard calls for a peaceful transition to democracy at a public meeting in Syria's capital yesterday that they said was unprecedented in five decades of iron-fisted Baath party rule.

The opposition figures, all of them independent of any party affiliation, gathered in a hotel in Damascus to discuss a way out of the deadly clashes between security forces and protesters that have rocked Syria since mid-March.

They sang the national anthem and held a minute's silence for the "martyrs, both civilian and military."

"There are two ways forward -- the first a clear and non-negotiable move to a peaceful transition to democracy which would rescue our country and our people," opposition activist Munzer Khaddam told the meeting.

"The alternative is a road that leads into the unknown and which will destroy everyone," he said.

"We are with the people and we, like them, have chosen the first path. Those who refuse to take it will go to hell."

Louai Hussein, a writer and top activist who has spent time in jail, called for "the creation of a democratic state based on citizenship and human rights to achieve justice and the equality of all Syrians without discrimination."

"The tyrannical regime in power must go," said Hussein. The president of the Syrian League for Human Rights, Abdel Karim Rihawi, stressed that the meeting was not intended to take the place of the "protesters in the street."

"We will talk so that we can formulate a national strategy on how to end Syria's current crisis," he earlier told AFP.

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