

Why? Cambodian Villagers Still Search for Answers to Khmer Rouge Brutality

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Again and again, in hurried and sometimes passionate voices, villagers rose to ask two prosecutors from the Khmer Rouge Tribunal the same questions: Why did Khmers kill Khmers? Why were they supported by the outside world? Why did the Khmer Rouge follow these policies of killing? Why did Khmers educated in France kill Khmers? Did they learn that in France? Why didn't the UN care about us during the Khmer Rouge regime? Why are you holding this trial?

Here in the rural town of Kratie, about 200 kilometers northeast of Phnom Penh, tribunal co-prosecutors Robert Petit of Canada and Cambodian Chea Leang tried to answer the questions from villagers last week.

They explained that they had only a limited legal mandate to find evidence against top Khmer Rouge leaders who have allegedly committed crimes against humanity. The tribunal, they explained, has only just begun gathering evidence in advance of trials scheduled for next year.

The questions from the perplexed villagers, however, revealed how deep rural Cambodia's ignorance is about the history of the genocidal Khmer Rouge era nearly 28 years after it fell. With the UN-funded tribunal having started to gather evidence against the few surviving Khmer Rouge leaders, for the first time a court is preparing to answer at least a few of the riddles. The trial is expected to start next year.

Theary Seng, the Executive Director of the Center for Social Development, says the questions are as important, in some ways, as the answers. Her center is organizing a series of such workshops in rural areas across the country in advance of the tribunal as part of the healing process for this still deeply wounded country.

A lawyer and the author of "Daughter of the Killing Fields," a memoir of her experiences as a child surrounded by Khmer Rouge terror, Seng says that most people in Cambodia still lead isolated lives in which they have little information beyond the village.

"Personally, I am skeptical about what the tribunal can accomplish," said Seng, 35, who grew up in the United States after both her parents were killed by the Khmer Rouge. "No court can really handle reconciliation but the process is still necessary because people here lack information across the board about the Khmer Rouge."

As many as 2 million of a population then of just over 7 million perished during the four years of Khmer Rouge rule, victims of one of the cruelest regimes the world has known. The "Angkar" or "organization" of radical communists emptied the cities, starved peasants and engaged in paranoid purges aimed at intellectuals, teachers and presumed enemies. They turned Cambodia into a byword for political tragedy of almost unprecedented scope.

But for millions of Cambodia's 13 million people, the Khmer Rouge was a purely local phenomenon.

They had – and still have – little knowledge of its national and international significance. By the time Petit and Chea Leang ended the dialogue with a short documentary about the Khmer Rouge terror and the tribunal, villagers remained confused. “I don’t know anything about the Khmer Rouge,” said Pen Met, 68. “This is the first time I saw a film like that. I didn’t know that they killed people. I did know that they worked hard to grow potatoes.”

“I could only catch a little,” said Phnong Sao Moeun, 30, said. “I thought there would be a tribunal today.”

Sin Sun, 68, fought on the side of the Khmer Rouge against the American-backed Lon Nol regime that was overthrown in 1975, but he is still struggling to comprehend what he was fighting for. “I fought for King Sihanouk,” he said. “It was only after April 17 (The day in 1975 that the Khmer Rouge took power), when I first heard the name Saloth Sar,” he said, referring to Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot’s original name.

Dressed in the garb of a Buddhist elder, Sin Sun asked the co-prosecutors if they could explain to him the training and political indoctrination he received in 1975. He asked about revolutionary songs and documents. “What were these songs and documents? Why did they train me to sing that? Please explain. What were their policies?” he asked. “Six members of my family were killed. Why did they die?”

Later, Sin Sun said that that he hopes the tribunal will bring him justice for his losses and help him to understand the motives of Pol Pot, who was also known as Bother Number One. All he knew from that time was that the Khmer Rouge taught him to hate city dwellers. “Avoid such social class conflict (in the future) or all will die,” he warned.

Because the 1997 show-trial of Pol Pot by the Khmer Rouge themselves was featured in the poorly translated documentary, many villagers were even more confused. They said they thought some Khmer Rouge leaders had already been tried, even though no independent court has ever heard testimony against the Khmer Rouge, which maintained an active insurgency here until 1998.

The prosecutors tried to answer the historical questions without exhibiting any bias against possible suspects. They emphasized that senior leaders, not low-level officials or countries such as China, which backed the Khmer Rouge at one time, or the US, which helped the Khmer Rouge to keep a seat in the United Nations even after the regime was overthrown by Vietnam in 1979, are subject to the tribunal law. The US did not even formally call for an international investigation into the atrocities until 1994.

The tribunal began work, finally, in July after years of political infighting in Cambodia and fears have been raised that it will do an incomplete job because its mandate is very narrow and there are figures in the current government who also have links to the old regime. The full truth may be inconvenient and, after so many years, impossible to ferret out. Protests have also been raised against some of the panel’s Cambodian judges who have been linked to highly political cases that were decided in favor of the current government of Prime Minister Hun Sen.

The tribunal is casting its net for very few remaining suspects, since most senior Khmer Rouge leaders are dead. A spokesperson for the tribunal says that probably no more than 10 people will be named to stand in the dock when the proceedings begin next year.

“No one will be prosecuted for being a member of a political party,” Petit assured villagers.

At the forum, Petit had his hands full with the villagers just trying to address the basic question repeated over and over: Why were the Khmer Rouge so brutal?

"Why do people kill like this? Because they think they can get away with it. The person who steals your cow and the person who kills a whole village does it for the same reason," he explained. "That is why we are having this tribunal. Every government spends money on a justice system. None work perfectly because we are all human." The second reason people commit these mass crimes is power. For whatever ideological reasons they believe in, they kill huge numbers of people to get and remain in power," he said. "In Cambodia ... the system they set up and the policies they followed made it impossible for most people to know why they were being killed. "The long-delayed tribunal, Petit said, is sincere in looking for answers. "Those responsible, or more likely those who worked for them, will be asked to explain why," he told villagers. "I am sorry to say, I cannot tell you why. "Petit explained to the villagers that his role is to compile evidence, not speculate on motivations. He said he understands the frustration of not knowing why loved ones died. "There are a lot of explanations and many are probably legitimate. But the law is about evidence and certainty. History is not black and white," he said.

As to why the UN and the international community sat by during the crimes, Petit said, "That question is best answered by those in power at the time."

Officials from the well-known Documentation Center of Cambodia, which has been amassing evidence against the Khmer Rouge for 15 years, were also on hand and invited villagers to visit their offices for information on the Khmer Rouge.

Foreign minister Ieng Sary, regime president Khieu Samphan and "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea are all still alive and not under arrest. Khieu Samphan has been living freely in Cambodia for years and denies everything. He told Newsweek magazine in September: "I knew nothing of what was happening in the countryside" during the Pol Pot years. He only learned of the slaughter, he claims, after Pol Pot's death in 1998. Ieng Sary surrendered to the government in 1996 and was granted amnesty. It is unclear whether he will be charged by the tribunal.

It remains to be seen if the narrow mandate of the tribunal will heal wounds that still run deep here. Some villagers said that they want a tribunal that would target locals who gleefully killed their neighbors. Some want the death penalty restored and want a still broader investigation into alleged political killings that have occurred recently.

"This forum is OK but will not be done severely enough for me," said retired teacher Tim Ninn, 60, who was skeptical about statements from Khieu Samphan that he didn't know about the killing. "He was one of the leaders," Tim Ninn said, adding that because of his fame and influence Khieu Samphan might sway the judges.

Observing the frustration, attorney Ang Udom said that more needs to be done to simplify the concepts for villagers. "They do not understand a lot of the complex issues and terminology," he said. "A lot more education needs to be done."

But that will be difficult. The forum was a project of the NGO community not the tribunal, noted Theary Seng. Despite its \$56.3 million budget, the tribunal itself has few funds for outreach to the rural population. Instead they are piggybacking on efforts like this one.

Recently, the Ministry of Education even admitted that the history of the Khmer Rouge is not even taught in schools due to squabbling over the wording in a modern history textbook that was pulled years ago from the classroom. History lessons in Cambodia stop a few years after independence from France in the 1950s.

Psychiatrist Dr Sotheara Chhim of the Transcultural Psycho-social Organization also attended the forum. He said villagers' seeming lack of understanding went along with the nation's deep trauma.

“There is a conspiracy of avoidance both at the national and individual level in Cambodia,” he said. “I think now is the time for the next generation to learn. If not, they may not understand what happened to their parents. Parents never talk about it, so there is little healing and a lot of ignorance about the past.”

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* From Asia Sentinel website.

* Asia Sentinel Senior Editor A. Lin Neumann contributed reporting to this story.