



## **Cambodia's new battle: Reconciling with the Khmer Rouge**

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Anlong Veng, Cambodia - Twelve years ago the town of Anlong Veng in north-west Cambodia surrendered to the government in a move that marked the end of the infamous Khmer Rouge movement.

Today most residents in the district are former Khmer Rouge cadre and their families. On Friday, 150 of them came together in a unique effort to discuss reconciliation, justice and reintegration.

Trying to reintegrate the supporters of one of the 20th century's most brutal regimes is vital to rebuilding Cambodian society, says Daravuth Seng, a Cambodian-American who heads a local non-governmental organization called the Center for Justice and Reconciliation (CJR), which organized the meeting.

"Our focus is to try to get victims and perpetrators to start talking in an effort to really understand one another, and in an effort to really work on reconciliation in Cambodia," he says.

He says he feels that most of the country's reconciliation efforts to date have been one-sided, excluding the Khmer Rouge.

The irony of setting the meeting in Anlong Veng was enhanced by holding it at the compound of the late general Ta Mok, the movement's final leader and one of its most brutal and intransigent members. Ta Mok is still well-regarded here.

Seng, who fled the killing fields of Cambodia as a boy with his family, acknowledges that what the organization is trying to achieve is "a huge, huge task," but says reconciliation must be inclusive.

"And with the Cambodian context, that must include a lot of the former perpetrators as well," he says, since understanding their perspective is central to reconciliation. It is no small task. The Khmer Rouge were responsible for the deaths of around 2 million people during their rule of Cambodia from 1975-79. Many of those who died were executed, while others succumbed to starvation, overwork and illness.

After the movement was driven from power in 1979, it regrouped on the western borders with Thailand and fought the government in Phnom Penh until finally capitulating in the late 1990s

In Phnom Penh, 300 kilometres south-east of Anlong Veng, the formal process is underway to provide some measure of accountability for crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge regime. That process is the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, a joint Cambodian-United Nations court.

Four former leaders of the movement, including its head of state and foreign minister, are in pre-trial detention. A fifth person, the regime's former security chief, was tried last year and judgment in his case is due in the coming months.

Early on at Friday's meeting, which was sponsored by Germany's development arm DED, it becomes clear that some former Khmer Rouge are concerned the court is looking to prosecute five more suspects.

The participants tell the meeting they are satisfied that justice and reconciliation require the prosecution of the five already in custody, but say the tribunal must stop there.

Im Chaem, a deputy council chief in Anlong Veng, says she and other elderly residents are concerned the court will investigate more and more suspects. She says when they crossed over to the government in 1998, Prime Minister Hun Sen promised there would be no losers.

"Now we don't know when our turn will be because we lived and served during that time," says Im Chaem, who has previously denied allegations of extreme cruelty levelled at her when she was a Khmer Rouge district chief. "There might be another five, and then five more and then 10."

The tribunal's public affairs officer Lars Olsen says the exchange highlights the contrast between victims and perpetrators of violence. He says that most Cambodians he encounters around the country are victims and want more prosecutions, not fewer.

Olsen tells the participants that the court is not looking to add further names to its list of suspects, and says a maximum of 10 in total are to face trial.

His answer reveals the limitations of the tribunal's work. The inevitable political and practical compromises mean thousands of people will get away with murder - including possibly some of those present at the meeting.

The former cadre broadly agreed on a number of points about reconciliation. One was that more than a decade after the movement's collapse they want other Cambodians to stop referring to them as "former Khmer Rouge."

"The term 'Khmer Rouge' is associated with killing and persecution," says one. "We are finished if we are referred to as that. Our children's lives will be ruined, and no one will let their children marry ours. We should just say we are all Cambodian now."

They also called for more economic development in the area, and said all people should be equal before the law.

There is recognition too that their lives have improved since reintegration. Anlong Veng today has schooling, medical care, tarred roads, and the opportunity for educated young people to go on to university.

It is a far cry from what went before, when thousands of Khmer Rouge lived in the mountains and were constantly on the move.

"Now it has changed from bitterness to sweetness - this is very important," says another attendee. "During the war we were always changing our position, unable to stay together and even eat together. Now that the war has ended we are able to gather at the same table and have a meal."

CJR's Seng is encouraged by the day's exchanges, and says one old lady cried as she told him she regretted what she had done as a Khmer Rouge cadre.

Seng says it is vital to understand the psychology behind what happened in order to prevent future atrocities.

"There is no quick fix for reconciliation, but I honestly believe this is moving in the right direction," he says. "We can't leave out a huge group from the reconciliation process."