

Former Khmer Rouge express views on reconciliation **April 15, 2010**

150 former Khmer Rouge gathered last week at the compound of their last leader, the late general Ta Mok, on the outskirts of Anlong Veng in northwestern Cambodia. Anlong Veng was the last stronghold of the Khmer Rouge and only came under government control in 1998. Some of the Khmer Rouge's most notorious leaders are still highly regarded here.

The former cadres came to the gathering to give their opinions on what reconciliation and justice mean to them, and to discuss the psychological trauma from decades of war.

Preventing atrocities in future

Daravuth Seng, who heads the Center for Justice and Reconciliation that organized the meeting, said that despite the trauma of the Khmer Rouge's four-year rule – when up to two million people died – and the subsequent two-decade long civil war, precious little reconciliation work had been done in Cambodia.

“People in general are very much social animals, and they want to come back into the fold,” Seng said while explaining the background for the gathering. “So we have to be really careful in not putting them into a context where they are saying things they don't necessarily mean, but yet leaving the language open enough so that meaningful reconciliation can happen.”

A Cambodian-American who trained as a lawyer in the United States, Seng added that another reason for the gathering, which was funded by the German development service, was to try to understand why the Khmer Rouge cadres had followed the path they did.

Knowing this could help prevent future atrocities of a similar kind, he explained: “If we are to say never again, we really need to understand both sides, to understand the way these folks perceive the world.”

Concern about UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal

The participants told the meeting that when it comes to justice, they believe the UN-backed war crimes tribunal that is underway in Phnom Penh should try only the five former senior Khmer Rouge who are currently in custody.

“We should only try those top revolutionary leaders. We should not try those middle or lower ranking officers because they are only the followers of the leaders,” one former cadre said in clear reference to recent news that the tribunal is looking to prosecute five more suspects.

Some people in this former stronghold worry that they could end up being among the five. They have warned that the tribunal could destabilize the reconciliation process.

Remorse is a sign of hope

Unsurprisingly, most of the participants of the gathering rejected the term “former Khmer Rouge”, which has become synonymous with murder and persecution. They said it unfairly tainted their children’s future prospects.

Overall, Daravuth Seng said the event had gone better than he had originally hoped. People had turned up and spoken about what they wanted and what they feared. He said that one woman had even cried and told him she regretted some of her acts. The fact that her remorse seemed genuine was a sign of hope, he added.