



## **Khmer Rouge legacy lingers 35 years after Phnom Penh's fall**

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Phnom Penh - Thirty-five years ago, Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, fell to the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot's ultra-Maoist movement, which over the preceding years had taken control of most of the country.

Many in the capital were relieved, believing now, after years of war, they could rebuild their lives. But as history has shown, they were terribly wrong.

The Khmer Rouge immediately began emptying the cities of their inhabitants and putting them to work in rural agricultural collectives, a policy that had deadly consequences. Up to 2 million people died from execution, starvation, disease and overwork under the four-year Khmer Rouge state known as Democratic Kampuchea.

Youk Chhang, who heads the Documentation Centre of Cambodia genocide archive, remembers well April 17, 1975, the day the capital fell.

"I was 14 and at home alone when the Khmer Rouge came," he said. "My mother was so worried about one of my sisters who was pregnant at the time [and was visiting her]." Youk Chhang said his mother had hoped to get home in time to fetch him, but the Khmer Rouge blocked the road. The movement had ordered the evacuation of the city.

"I had no idea of where to go, so I just followed the crowd," he said. "But I remembered the name of my mother's home village in Takeo province. I had been there once before when I was a child."

Thinking he would meet his mother there despite the fact she had left the village in the 1930s, Youk Chhang headed south along roads in pouring rain together with hundreds of thousands of people.

By the time he had travelled 30 kilometres, or about a third of his journey, he was alone. "I was the only person on the road because the others had got off and gone to their homes," he said.

Youk Chhang eventually found the village, but it was another four months before he was reunited with his mother.

Emptying the cities was the first step in the Khmer Rouge's bid to refashion Cambodian society. The movement outlawed family and religion, and its paranoid nature meant that class enemies - intellectuals, politicians, those in the military - were swept away. Most were killed.

When the regime had eliminated its perceived external enemies, it turned inward and began to consume itself in a rage of paranoia and blood.

Important enemies were tortured at a former school in Phnom Penh known as S-21. For most of its four-year existence, it was under the command of a man named Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch.

Last year, Duch stood trial at the joint UN-Cambodian war crimes tribunal in Phnom Penh for the deaths of 12,380 people who passed through S-21. Judgement was expected in June.

Duch's is the first international trial of anyone from the Khmer Rouge regime. Much of the documentation used as evidence against Duch came from the Documentation Centre of Cambodia.

The movement's senior surviving leaders have yet to stand trial: Khieu Samphan, the former head of state; Ieng Sary, the foreign minister; Ieng Thirith, the social affairs minister; and Nuon Chea, known as Brother Number Two, reckoned to be the movement's chief ideologue.

All four are in pre-trial detention and are likely to appear in court early next year. Whether the elderly detainees would survive until the end their trials is another matter. But the fall of Phnom Penh is not the only anniversary this week: 12 years ago, Pol Pot died in the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Anlong Veng in the far north-west. Brother Number One was cremated on Dangrek Mountain, which straddles the Thai-Cambodian border about 300 kilometres from Phnom Penh. It is about as far from the capital as you can get in Cambodia.

Today, his cremation site - a waist-high, rusting tin roof held up by aging wooden posts on a scrubby piece of land - is remarkable only for its sheer ordinariness.

The legacy that he and the other members of his regime left is a deeply damaged nation, still struggling to recover from serious physical and psychological wounds. It is a legacy some are trying to redress.

Last week, the Centre for Justice and Reconciliation, a local non-governmental organization, held a reconciliation meeting of 150 former Khmer Rouge in Anlong Veng. Daravuth Seng, a Cambodian-American lawyer who fled to the United States as a boy and heads the NGO, said bringing the movement's former followers back into society is vital.

Understanding what drove them to follow that path is essential, too, as it is the surest way to avoid future tainted anniversaries, he said.

"If we are to say never again, we really need to understand both sides, to understand the way these folks perceive the world," he said. "In one sense, we are all victims."