



## **Wounds remain 35 years after Khmer Rouge rise to power**

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Chhum Mey cheered Cambodia's Khmer Rouge foot soldiers when they came to power but now he weeps every day for his wife and children lost to Pol Pot's totalitarian regime.

The Khmer Rouge swept into Phnom Penh 35 years ago Saturday, launching a four-year pursuit of a communist utopia that led to the deaths of up to two million Cambodians through overwork, starvation and execution.

"We were happy that there was no more fighting as we waved white flags to the soldiers but things turned out so miserably and millions of people were killed," says Chum Mey, 79, who also endured horrors imprisoned by the regime.

Last year Cambodia began UN-backed genocide trials in a bid to bring justice to a handful of surviving members of the regime, which emptied the cities and forced the population to work on collective farms.

But Chum Mey, who told the tribunal last year he buried his two-year-old son died as the Khmer Rouge marched them from Phnom Penh, says there is lingering hostility from that era that won't be resolved in a court.

"Some people have let the past go but some still feel the hatred," he said.

"We need reconciliation in order to avoid revenge against each other. If we continue to take revenge against each other we fear that our young generation will follow the path of the Khmer Rouge," he added.

The regime was toppled by Vietnamese forces in early 1979 but its soldiers continued a fierce guerrilla war, beating a retreat to western areas along the Thai border before collapsing altogether in 1998, the year Pol Pot died.

"It has been more than 30 years so the situation has changed. People have chosen different ways of living and they think peace is the most important thing in their lives," Khmer Rouge tribunal spokesman Reach Sambath said.

Despite the passage of time, a survey last year by the University of California, Berkeley found the majority of Cambodians still harbour feelings of hatred towards members of the Khmer Rouge responsible for violence.

Almost half of the respondents said they were not comfortable living in the same community with former Khmer Rouge members, while 71 percent said they wanted to see former cadres suffer in some way.

Meanwhile, 40 percent of Cambodians said they would take revenge against former Khmer Rouge members if they could.

Daravuth Seng, director of the Centre for Justice Reconciliation, says decades after the Khmer Rouge have left power, many Cambodians are still afraid to speak out against perpetrators of atrocities who live among them.

"Unfortunately with the legacy of the Khmer Rouge, they not only destroyed infrastructure, they also destroyed a lot of the components that hold together a society like trust, trust in one's family," he said.

"Now that there's a Khmer Rouge tribunal, there's a safe space. All of the history is getting dug up with everyone else."

While he does not expect the UN-backed court to reconcile all traumas from Cambodia's Khmer Rouge past, Chum Mey was offered the opportunity to face the regime leader who oversaw his torture and imprisonment.

As a witness last June at the trial of former prison chief Kaeng Guek Eav, alias Duch, Chum Mey described being subjected to beatings, electric shocks and shuddering in pain when two of his toenails were pulled out.

The agony finally ended when he falsely confessed to being a CIA and KGB agent, Chum Mey said, and his life was then spared because he was put to use in prison repairing sewing machines and a water pump.

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