

Tribunal Not a Cure-All, Experts Warn Men Kimseng April 22, 2010

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Chhang Youk, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, told a gathering at New Jersey's Rutgers University that survivors prefer different ways to seek reconciliation and justice.

Some only require a simple apology; some seek the full truth; some want legal punishment for the perpetrators; still others would prefer the country move beyond a trial of Khmer Rouge leaders.

"So you can see that Cambodia is not just only broken but also [Cambodians] are divided as an individual, as a family, as a nation," Chhang Youk said. "And that's [not] because we don't care about justice—because we do care about justice, so much."

Cambodians don't want to see atrocities like those of the Khmer Rouge repeated, because these are difficult to reconcile, and at times "impossible," he said.

Chhang Youk's Documentation Center has worked for years to compile evidence of Khmer Rouge atrocities. This has included interviews with survivors, documenting their accounts, and writing a book of history on the regime.

Chhang Youk told the audience Monday that the prevention of genocide was the responsibility of every individual, university, institution and nation. Once genocide occurs, reconciliation of a nation's suffering is hard to find.

The Khmer Rouge ruled for only four years, but it has taken more than 30 to relieve the trauma, he said. And it's still there.

Still, he said, all is not lost.

"It sounds very disappointing about Cambodia with the number of people killed, with the infrastructures that have been destroyed, with poverty, corruption, good governance, and so forth, but there's hope," he said. "There's hope for change."

That change requires action now, he said, or the trauma will remain, not just within victims, but in their children.

Currently, the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal is holding five leaders of the regime. It has completed the trial of one, Kaing Guek Ieng, or Duch, and is working on its second case, which involves Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith.

Proponents of the trials, which have cost the international community millions of dollars and been plagued with delays, say they will bring a measure of reconciliation. Skeptics say this may not be so, at least not entirely.

"With genocide, I don't know if the people will get closure with the tribunal," said Marco Oliviera, a third-year student of criminal justice and political science who attended the lecture. "The way, I think, is a simple apology, [which] will largely bring closure, and we have to move on."

"Too often, I think, people think the tribunal is somehow going to bring truth and reconciliation, and that is setting the tribunal up for failure," Alexander Hinton, director of the Center for the Study of Conflict Resolution and Human Rights, told VOA Khmer. "We have to recognize the tribunal for what it is."

The tribunal can accomplish some things, such as bringing forward evidence and understanding of the past, as well as holding leaders responsible for their actions, he said. "But it can't do everything."