

# Los Angeles Times

**Airing memories of Khmer Rouge atrocities helps some victims recover**

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**May 1, 2010**

*About 170 Cambodian refugees in the U.S. told their stories to be used at trial against Khmer Rouge leaders accused of crimes against humanity. Many had never spoken of what they endured.*

Kieng Seng never wanted to relive her memories of the brutal Khmer Rouge era. She never said a word to her friends or children, having "buried the memories in the ground under 100 layers."

But last year, she recounted those nightmares openly for the first time, entering them as witness testimony in tribunals against former Khmer Rouge leaders accused of crimes against humanity.

Seng was one of about 170 Cambodian refugees in the United States who submitted personal histories at the urging of activists who aimed to give expatriate Cambodians a voice in the Phnom Penh tribunal.

On Saturday, Seng and several dozen genocide survivors gathered at a Long Beach library for an update on the tribunal's progress and the status of their testimonies. "We are here to honor you as survivors of the Khmer Rouge," said Leakhena Nou, an assistant professor of sociology at Cal State Long Beach who led the outreach efforts. "We are here to tell the perpetrators in the regime that they did not destroy your spirits. . . . You have one moment in history to right the wrong of what happened decades ago."

As she spoke, several women in the audience pulled tissues from their pockets and dabbed their tears.

Last year, the United Nations-backed tribunal tried the first of five Khmer Rouge leaders whose charges stem from the genocide that took at least 1.7 million lives between 1975 and 1979.

The testimonies gathered by Nou's group, the Applied Social Research Institute of Cambodia, were submitted to the court in January and entered for the second

tribunal, which will try the remaining four leaders and is expected to begin next year.

Persuading survivors who had buried their memories for decades to open up was difficult, Nou said. "They felt the world did not want to listen to their stories," she said.

Many feared retribution if they were to travel to Cambodia, she said. But when one survivor began to share stories, others followed.

The group collected about 170 oral and written testimonies in Long Beach, home to the U.S.'s largest population of Cambodian refugees, as well as in Lowell, Mass.; Portland, Ore.; and Philadelphia.

Throughout the year the rules of the court kept changing, complicating the process of collecting testimonies, Nou said. And there was no guarantee that the Victim Information Forms they submitted would ultimately be used in court.

But despite the uncertainty and politics of the court, Nou and others said the process has helped survivors in deeper ways.

Sundaram Rama said the testimonies have allowed survivors like himself to heal. "I think people are now ready to tell their stories," said Rama, director of the Cambodian Family, a social services nonprofit in Santa Ana. "Five or 10 years ago, people would share stories with me, but they would ask me not to share with anyone else. But now, more and more people are feeling comfortable."

Seng said she felt a sense of release in being able to let go of the horrific memories that had been bottled inside of her for 35 years when she gave her testimony in Santa Ana last September.

When the Khmer Rouge came to power, Seng was 13. Decades later, the memories remained vivid — being forced to wake up at 3 a.m. and dig to build a road, the fear of being separated from her sisters, brother and mother. In her sleep, she would see images of a man dressed in black pointing a gun at her or imagine she was drowning in water she was forced to dig through.

But after giving her testimony, she said, she felt lighter. The nightmares have lessened. "It's like it's passed already," she said. "I don't want this to go on until the next life. I want it to go away."

Still, the wounds run deep, and she said her pain may never entirely go away. She still has not told her two children everything.

"I don't want my kids to know all my suffering. I don't want them to think about what's going on with me," she said. "I want them to focus on studying here and to be happy. I don't want to remind myself."

