



Cambodia remembers Khmer Rouge victims

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This time every year, a ceremony is held at the notorious Killing Fields on the outskirts of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh to remember the victims of the Khmer Rouge.

ROBERT CARMICHAEL: Cambodia marked the saddest period in its history on Thursday with the annual remembrance service for victims of the Khmer Rouge regime.

The ceremony is known as the Day of Anger, and is held on the edge of Phnom Penh at a place called Chhoeung Ek.

Today Chhoeung Ek is a popular tourist site known to most of them as the Killing Fields. Between 1975 and 1979, it was a place where thousands of Cambodians were taken to be killed - generally by a blow with an iron bar to the back of the neck.

Cambodia had many such killing fields during the Khmer Rouge regime. Chhoeung Ek is simply the best-known.

And it is here on May 20 each year that hundreds of dignitaries, monks and members of the public come to mark the occasion.

The Day of Anger ceremony lasts about two hours. There are some speeches, descriptions of what happened, and at the end, a blessing ceremony by the monks.

And there is a 15-minute play - a stark and chilling reminder of what happened here.

The sounds you can hear are a re-enactment of mass killings.

Around a dozen Cambodian men and women are dressed in the black trousers and shirts of the Khmer Rouge. Another 40 are their victims.

The play unfolds on grass in front of Chhoeung Ek's tower of human skulls.

There the soldiers act out the killings of men, women and children.

It is highly realistic, with knives, fake AK-47s, and staves. The victims scream, plead and cry. All of this just yards from where the real killings took place little over three decades ago.

It makes for very uneasy viewing, and leaves many in the crowd in tears. It does so every year.

Pa Socheatvong is a deputy governor of Phnom Penh. He says the day is a mixture of remembering the dead, and expressing anger at the Khmer Rouge regime, which was headed by Pol Pot.

PA SOCHEATVONG: Cambodian people respect the people who were killed in the Pol Pot regime. Pol Pot betrayed the country by using the people's blood as capital, so people [are] very angry with the Pol Pot regime.

ROBERT CARMICHAEL: In an ironic twist, the man who sent thousands to be killed here at Chhoeung Ek between 1975 and 1979 is currently in jail awaiting judgement after his trial last year for crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Comrade Duch, as he is known, headed the Khmer Rouge's main torture centre called S-21.

All but a handful of 20,000 people who went to S-21 were executed, most just yards from where today's ceremony is taking place.

No-one knows how many people died under the Khmer Rouge - estimates range from between 1.5 million to 3 million people. Many were murdered. Many others died of illness, overwork and starvation.

It was undoubtedly Cambodia's bleakest period, and today is about remembering that time.