



Cambodia's Khmer Rouge Tribunal Legacy Found in Communities Around Country

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As an international tribunal in Cambodia prepares to charge four Khmer Rouge leaders with genocide, some people are looking ahead to what will be left behind when the court finally closes its doors.

On the outskirts of Battambang stands the Wat Samroung Knong. Today this Buddhist temple is tranquil, but when the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, it was anything but.

Crimes against humanity

Wat Samroung Knong was a killing site, one of hundreds scattered around the country. Then the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge emptied the cities and tried to create a utopian, agrarian society. In the process, well over a million people died of starvation and disease, or were executed by the Khmer Rouge.

The temple's current leader, Acha Thun Sovath, was a young monk when the Khmer Rouge came in 1975. He was forced to quit the monkhood and work in the rice fields.

Many other monks were executed, as the Khmer Rouge banned religion in the effort to reshape Cambodian society.

Acha Thun Sovath says more than 10,000 people were tortured and executed at the temple, their bodies dumped in its ponds.

Stories of mass killings are commonplace across the country. Yet many young people do not believe Cambodians committed such horrific acts against each other.

Acha Thun Sovath says that does not surprise him.

He says now he is an old man, but back in 1974 when he heard people talking about how the Khmer Rouge were killing monks and ordinary people, he did not believe it either.

Concerns

Daravuth Seng is a Cambodian-American lawyer who until recently headed a group called the Center for Justice and Reconciliation, or CJR.

On a tour of the temple, Seng says Wat Samroung Knong's history makes it fitting as a location for what are known as legacy projects – something tangible that will be left behind once the Khmer Rouge tribunal in Phnom Penh finally closes its doors in a few years.

CJR worked with Acha Thun Sovath and the nearby community to build a learning center, which has taken shape over one of the pools that was used as a mass grave. The building – a wooden structure on stilts that stands over the large pond - is nearly finished.

Daravuth Seng explains its purpose.

"Our hope is a physical space for them to come together and also explore, and to have documentation available so that some of these accounts do correlate with what my parents, or aunts and uncles, or surviving relatives have actually mentioned," Seng said.

Seng says the center is unique, because the community was deeply involved in its planning, and also provided materials and time to build it.

The center is one of a number of legacy projects under way or being discussed.

Verdict

In Phnom Penh, the international tribunal this year has sentenced one senior member of the Khmer Rouge for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Four others are to face trial in the coming year. The tribunal's goal is to bring the few surviving Khmer Rouge leaders to justice, and to build a legacy helps Cambodia recover from its past.

Michelle Staggs Kelsall heads the tribunal monitoring project for the East-West Center, a research institute in the U.S. state of Hawaii, and has written about legacy projects at other international tribunals.

She says the most important legacy of the court is arguably the goal of improving Cambodia's judiciary by transferring the good legal practices being used at the court.

Documenting history

Another important area is ensuring the people have a historical account of what happened under Khmer Rouge rule.

One court-sanctioned project is a so-called virtual tribunal – a database of all the court documents for future generations to view.

Staggs Kelsall says the Khmer Rouge tribunal's legacy program is in an embryonic stage, but that is not unusual: Legacy issues typically become more important the longer the tribunal is in existence.

Back at Wat Samroung Knong, Acha Thun Sovath says the learning center is a vital opportunity to educate the next generation.

He says they will never forget and they must always remember what happened at these buildings so they can tell the next generation and let them know about the people who died under the Khmer Rouge.

Daravuth Seng says the completed center will cost around \$10,000. He wants to see this sort of low-cost, self-sustaining project replicated across the country.

He says the tribunal was set up to provide legal justice, and has proved an essential starting point for the process of national reconciliation.

But projects like this center will provide a permanent voice for the community to learn what happened.

And that, he says, very much fits one of the points of the tribunal: To help the Cambodian people learn from their own tragic history.