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Former Khmer Rouge stronghold recalls regime's 'repentant' killer David Boyle & Sun Narin August 18, 2010

Outside a small, cross-topped church in Samlot district, a crowd of about 100 people gathered yesterday to discuss a notorious mass murderer's day of judgment.

It was here, some 15 years ago, that the notorious Tuol Sleng commandant Kaing Guek Eav, convicted and sentenced to 30 years' jail by the Khmer Rouge tribunal last month, first confessed his sins and became a born-again Christian.

At the community forum, organised by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, Duch's former pastor, San Timothy, urged those assembled to accept the verdict, forgive Duch and put the past behind them, something that most in this former Khmer Rouge stronghold appeared happy to do.

"God brought him to lovingness – to appear in the court and confess everything," he said. "God always forgives people, even though this person was his enemy. He is the sample of forgiveness."

In 1999, Irish photographer Nic Dunlop found Duch working in Samlot for an American aid organisation under the pseudonym Hang Pin. The former jailer claimed to have converted to Christianity several years earlier.

On trial at the Khmer Rouge tribunal in Phnom Penh last year, Duch claimed to have repented and expressed "profound regret" for his actions at Tuol Sleng, where he is thought to have overseen the torture and killing of up to 16,000 people.

During the trial's closing arguments, Duch shocked observers by demanding that he be released.

But after watching a projection of the closing moments of Duch's July 26 verdict, San Timothy's fellow pastor Sang Horn proclaimed the former prison chief a hero for having had the courage to repent.

“He is a hero because he did something that is in the past, not now, and he confessed his sins in front of God and the people,” he said.

In Samlot, the restive breeding ground of the Khmer Rouge insurgency and the refuge of many cadres following the regime’s fall in 1979, attitudes about Cambodia’s communist nightmare remain ambivalent.

After receiving documents including DC-Cam’s historical textbook and a published copy of the verdict, many of those in attendance expressed a desire to leave the past behind.

Chuon Pheng, the chief of Ta Sanh commune, where the event was held, told the forum that he and other villagers were not aware of the Khmer Rouge top brass or the existence of Tuol Sleng prison.

“We experienced the regime, but we were not aware of Pol Pot. We only tried to work for living,” he said.

Youk Chhang, DC-Cam’s director, lamented the culture of denial that had taken root among some elders in Samlot, though he welcomed the church’s participation in the forum, which he said he hoped would facilitate greater community engagement with the historical record.

“A hero is not somebody who murders 12,000 innocent people, and if you define someone like this as a hero there is clearly a danger that genocide will return,” he said.

“Clearly you can see that some of them were here with the Khmer Rouge for a long, long time and deny knowledge of what happened,” he added.

Youk Chhang also regretted the absence of Duch’s sister, Hang Kim Hong, and brother-in-law, Nop Bun Long, who were both invited to attend.

Like many of the area’s residents, their personal ties to the Khmer Rouge appear to remain strong, even after the passage of so many years.

“It seems to be that she has this question in her mind,” he said of Duch’s sister.

“What if Duch hadn’t been discovered and arrested?”