



Cambodians tackle tribunal's legacy after Khmer Rouge trial
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Battambang, Cambodia - On the outskirts of the city of Battambang in western Cambodia stands a Buddhist pagoda called Wat Samroung Knong.

These days the pagoda is a tranquil place, but for four years from 1975 the Khmer Rouge turned it into a killing field as they sought to reshape Cambodian society.

It is a place the community's religious leader, Acha Thun Sovath, remembers well. In the early 1970s he lived here as a young monk, but the Khmer Rouge forced him to leave the monkhood and work in the rice fields with everyone else.

Wat Samroung Knong became a torture and execution centre. The Khmer Rouge interrogated their prisoners - soldiers, teachers and others - demanding to know what positions they had held under the previous regime.

"When they finished questioning them, they took them to a piece of land behind this pagoda where they killed them," he said.

More than 10,000 people were executed here. It was a brutal time, but try telling that to some of the young people, many of whom simply do not believe Cambodians killed each other, said Acha Thun Sovath.

At the time, neither did he.

"I am now an old man, but in 1974 when I heard people talking about how the Khmer Rouge were killing monks and ordinary people, I didn't believe it either," he said softly.

Today, three decades after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge, the pagoda is the venue for an effort to ensure this community learns about the brutal past.

Built on stilts over what was a mass grave - a deep pond around twice the length of an Olympic-

sized swimming pool - a simple wooden structure is nearing completion.

It will be a community learning centre, and fits the concept of legacy projects. They are what is to remain once the international war crimes tribunal in Phnom Penh closes.

Some of the money to build this centre came from the Australian embassy, but the community itself donated materials, time and money.

That gives them an important stake in ensuring it succeeds, said Daravuth Seng, recently executive director of the Center for Justice and Reconciliation, a local non-governmental organization that was also involved in the project.

Seng said the building would provide a gathering space for the community, and would hold information about the Khmer Rouge period.

"So there's opportunity to learn about their past, as well as plan for their future," he said.

The UN-backed tribunal can provide legal justice, which is essential, but that is only one facet of what is needed.

"So more than it being the end, the court is actually the beginning of a process called reconciliation," he said. "Projects like this are very important."

They are also not expensive. Seng reckons it will have cost around 10,000 dollars when it the project finished, which is less than some senior tribunal staff earn in a month.

Other projects are either underway or in the planning stage. One that has started is the virtual tribunal, a database that will hold a digital archive of all court records.

Michelle Staggs Kelsall heads the Khmer Rouge tribunal monitoring section at the East-West Center, a US-based research body.

Two legacy-type projects stand out for her at this tribunal. One is the court's aim to transfer its good judicial practice to Cambodia's domestic court system.

The other is that the tribunal leaves behind a record of what happened during the Khmer Rouge years.

Staggs Kelsall said discussion of the court's legacy has really just started following the completion of its first case, that of Comrade Duch, the former head of S-21, the Khmer Rouge's main torture and execution centre.

"If you look at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Court, both have shown more of an interest [in the legacy aspect] the longer they have gone on," she said.

Back at Wat Samroung Knong, Acha Thun Sovath said the centre would prove vital in ensuring the young learn about their past. "We must tell them what happened here under the Khmer Rouge," he said.

Daravuth Seng said the tribunal has shown Cambodians the world is interested in their suffering, which has increased the desire among Cambodians to learn more.

"One reason we had the tribunal was to help people learn from their history and to provide a voice," he said. "And now, here's a permanent voice that will allow the community to teach itself."