

The Phnom Penh Post

Successful people read The Post

A City's Nightmare Revisited
Chhay Channyda
April 17, 2012

Cambodians will gather today to pray for the souls of some 1.7 million of their countrymen brutally killed by the Khmer Rouge on the 37th anniversary of the day that the regime seized power and began forcibly evacuating Phnom Penh.

At the Choeung Ek killing fields, the mass grave in Phnom Penh's Dangkor district where thousands of skulls are stacked as a reminder of the scale of the regime's atrocities, 50 monks will be joined by some 500 members of the opposition Sam Rainsy Party.

Ke Sovannorth, secretary general of the SRP, said yesterday it was a time to remember the awful three years, eight months and 20 days the regime ruled the country.

"It is a historic day. We will remember and never want it to happen again, because this regime made women widows and separated children from their parents," he said.

Svay Thida, now 50, remembered yesterday that she was 11 years old on the day when the Khmer Rouge ordered her family and about two and a half million others who were mostly refugees to leave their homes in Phnom Penh. "We were asked to leave our home in only three days, but never returned for more than 3 years," she said.

Though many were unaware of the horrors to come, Svay Thida said she had heard that some of her wealthy neighbours were so frightened of the advancing Khmer Rouge that they had elected to poison themselves in their own homes rather than face certain death.

The Khmer Rouge systematically targeted intellectuals and people with "bourgeois" backgrounds, forcing everyone to write personal biographies and extracting "confessions" through torture.

They sought to purify the population through an agrarian revolution under which perhaps one quarter of the population was killed through starvation, overwork and murder.

Photojournalist Al Rockoff said he had seen first-hand the type of brutality the Khmer Rouge regime was willing to exact on civilians as early as 1974, when troops fighting for then president Lon Nol retook the town of Oudong from the insurgents.

"There were thousands of civilian and military massacred there. It was pretty obvious of what they capable of doing to civilians – not on the battlefield, not in combat, just the summary execution of many people," he said.

But Rockoff, who remained in Phnom Penh after April 17 for several weeks and took some of the most enduring photos of the violence that was engulfing the country, said most of the Western media was simply not interested.

More than three decades after Cambodia was liberated from the Khmer Rouge, Western interest in the former regime is now high as the Khmer Rouge tribunal tries the regime's three most senior surviving leaders.

Chum Mey, a survivor of the notorious S-21 prison who testified against the prison's director, the first man convicted by the court – Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch – said he resented the excuses being made in the present trial by the highest-profile suspect, Brother No 2 Nuon Chea.

The 82-year-old questioned how Nuon Chea could testify that Phnom Penh was evacuated “to find enemies”.

“Were all of the evictees from Phnom Penh enemies? We felt pain, but now we just want a confession to make national reconciliation,” he said.