



Cambodians Find 20 Skulls In Suspected Khmer Rouge Mass Grave August 6, 2012

Villagers in northwestern Cambodia unearthed what could be a mass grave from the Khmer Rouge era with about 20 skulls and some leg bones bound with rope, officials said Monday.

The village is near a former Khmer Rouge prison and the site is believed to be one of the “killing fields” from the regime’s brutal rule in the 1970s. It wasn’t yet known if Saturday’s discovery of skulls and other skeletal remains involved more than 20 victims.

The Documentation Center of Cambodia, which has collected evidence about Khmer Rouge atrocities, had identified the area in 1998 as having several mass graves based on interviews with hundreds of villagers but it was never excavated, said Youk Chhang, director of the center.

“We estimate that 35,000 or more people died at this site,” the director said.

An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians — about one in five people in the small Southeast Asian country — died of torture, starvation, medical neglect, hard labor and execution during the Khmer Rouge’s 1975-79 reign. The group ran nearly 200 prisons where prisoners were tortured before being killed.

The discovery of a new mass grave would be the first since a UN-backed tribunal put five former high-ranking Khmer Rouge officials on trial for genocide and other crimes beginning in 2009.

Authorities ordered digging crews to the area, about 60 kilometers (40 miles) from Siem Reap, home to Cambodia’s famed Angkor Wat temples, said Siem Reap governor Sou Phirin.

“I cannot say how many bodies are buried here, but these people were killed under the Khmer Rouge regime,” said Sou Phirin.

The bones were transferred to a Buddhist temple where a prayer ceremony would be performed.

“We have collected the bodies and put them in a proper place,” the governor said. “We will not let them stay in a grave like this anymore.”

One of the facility’s former prisoners, 52-year-old Ing Mara, said she was beaten, whipped and kept chained at the neck in a prison cell during a 1-year detention. She escaped when the Khmer Rouge was overthrown in 1979 and recalled the horror of seeing other prisoners being led to the mass grave site and never returning.

“I watched so many prisoners being taken to the killing place, every night,” Ing Mara said in a telephone interview. “I am in shock that their bodies are now being discovered.”

The Khmer Rouge’s chief jailer was sentenced to life in prison for war crimes, and the trial of three other leaders is ongoing at the U.N.-tribunal. A fifth defendant’s mental fitness for trial has been challenged.

Further trials are in doubt because of funding trouble and resistance within Cambodia to prosecuting more Khmer Rouge figures.