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## Survivor of Khmer Rouge torture center chronicles ordeal with paintings

The Khmer Rouge's murderous legacy has been depicted in art by a survivor of an infamous torture center run by the radical communist regime, responsible for the deaths of nearly 2 million Cambodians.

Vann Nath, 62, opened a showing Thursday of 10 paintings portraying the notorious S-21 prison — also known as Tuol Sleng — in the middle of the capital, Phnom Penh.

"My purpose in painting these pictures was because I want the young generation to know about the Khmer Rouge regime, and to show how innocent Cambodians were accused by them of being the 'enemy' and later killed even though they were not guilty at all," he said.

Up to 16,000 men, women and children were tortured there from 1975-79 and later taken away to be executed. Only 14 people, including Vann Nath, are thought to have survived.

He managed to survive the ordeal by taking the job of painting and sculpting portraits of the group's leader, Pol Pot.

A few of these propaganda works survive, bitter monuments to a regime whose radical policies caused the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million people nationwide by execution, overwork, disease and malnutrition.

His new exhibition is meant to make a younger generation of Cambodians, who had no experience of life under the Khmer Rouge, aware of the atrocities that left the country shattered in body and soul.

"It is very hard for me to paint the pictures, but I have to overcome that in my mind because I think that if I am not showing my pictures, nobody will know how much suffering I encountered," Vann Nath said at a press conference marking the unveiling of his paintings, all done this year.

In February, Vann Nath was one among 10 Southeast Asians chosen as recipients of the Hellman/Hammett human rights award. Eight Vietnamese writers — all of whom have either been jailed or harassed by police for challenging Vietnam's one-party system — and a journalist from Myanmar forced to flee his homeland were also among the 45 writers from 22 countries to receive the award.

The awards are meant to assist writers in financial need as a result of expressing their views. The Hellman/Hammett award is named after U.S. playwright Lillian Hellman and her longtime companion, novelist Dashiell Hammett, both of whom were interrogated in the 1950s about their political beliefs and affiliations.

During the press conference, Vann Nath expressed despair over the prospects for a U.N.-backed Khmer Rouge genocide tribunal that expects to begin trying suspects early next year, though it still has not even indicted anyone. Surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge still live freely in Cambodia.

"I am totally without hope because it's almost 30 years now," he said when asked his opinion of the tribunal. "I have no hope that the court will give me justice."

Many of those who managed to survive the Khmer Rouge years have now died without seeing any justice done, he added.