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Sexual Violence Recounted During KR Regime

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Chum Ly was a young woman with a 4-month-old baby when two Khmer Rouge checkpoint guards pulled her into a hut, stripped and then raped her for over three hours. Hong Savath was a teenager when her family was murdered and she was tied up and raped by three men.

Sok Samith told of her Vietnamese friend impregnated by rape, forced to work in shackles and then sent to prison where she gave birth before being executed. And Kim Thavy, now a slight 80-year-old, outlived more than 600 women held in a detention center who were taken away in large groups by guards “to be played with.” None ever returned, but Ms. Thavy survived, though she was so weak that it took her a day and a night to crawl 200 meters to safety.

The four women broke down in tears many times yesterday as they spoke out about the horrific crimes committed against them and their loved ones.

Many of the hundreds-strong audience cried openly too as the stories were recounted at the second Women’s Hearing, a forum for survivors to share their experiences of sex crimes during the Khmer Rouge regime.

The need to draw these stories from survivors—many of whom effectively buried them for fear of being ostracized—was born from a lack of documentation outlining gender-based crimes during the years of the Khmer Rouge regime, according to the Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP), which organized the forum in Phnom Penh.

“The historical record has failed to acknowledge the widespread, systematic gender-based violence committed during this period,” the CDP said in a statement yesterday. Of the litany of sexual crimes committed during the three years, eight months and 20 days that Pol Pot was in power, only forced marriage has been included in the indictments against the three defendants currently on trial at the Khmer Rouge war crimes tribunal.

But if these stories cannot be told at the tribunal, they can at least be shared at the CDP Women’s Hearing, which was set up in December 2011 to help end the culture of silence that has shrouded such atrocities.

“Victims and survivors need family, community and national support,” said CDP Project Coordinator Duong Savorn, who had to take several tearful pauses as he introduced the

survivors. “They are in need of justice. The ECCC is still proceeding without hearing the victims,” he said.

Mr. Savorn explained that a lack of acknowledgement for past sex crimes could be inextricably linked to similar crimes being committed today because of a failure to punish perpetrators.

“I appeal to men and youth to support these women with the aim of reducing and eliminating violence against women from now on,” Mr. Savorn said.

Although the Khmer Rouge regime fell in 1979, Cambodia has only been at peace since 1998 and experts say sexual crimes were widespread in Cambodia for many years after Pol Pot was toppled.

Silke Studzinsky, an international co-lawyer for civil parties at the tribunal, said gender-based violence does not stop once conflict has ceased, and that a post-conflict climate often fosters impunity for acts of sexual violence.

“I prefer to use the term ‘sexualized’ instead of ‘sexual’ violence, as it reflects the fact that rape is not an aggressive manifestation of sexuality, but a sexual manifestation of aggression,” she said.

“A number of countries emerging from armed conflict report a very high and/or increasing incidence of criminal- and family-based violence,” she said.

CDP Executive Director Sok Sam Oeun said the government needs to establish dedicated forensic services that can help the police investigate rape cases.

“The police are hesitant to proceed with rape cases, as there is often not enough evidence,” he said.

Hor Malin, an undersecretary of state at the Ministry of Women’s Affairs who also wept as the survivors recounted their stories at the forum, encouraged women to talk more openly about gender-based violence as a way of raising awareness.

“We want to take these experiences and find solutions for both during and after the conflict,” she said. “We hope to create strategies and policies to promote equity of gender and improve it gradually.”