



Ex-Khmer Rouge defend the dark past
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Sam Soeurn pushes aside the ears of corn that grow in the fields over the dirt track from his house.

He looks more than his 62 years - though the farmer's weather-beaten skin and missing front teeth could account for that.

But he also seems content, smiling broadly at some of his 29 grandchildren as they lay the bricks for a new hen house.

He is greeted with the respect befitting a village chief by the other members of the small community of Tuk Pos in Pailin province.

"Life is good," he says. "We are very happy."

But then he unbuttons his blue shirt to reveal an intricate, faded tattoo. This is what he believes protected him from enemy bullets during his 15 years as a Khmer Rouge soldier.

"In 1972 it didn't matter if you wanted to join the Khmer Rouge or not. There was no choice," he says.

Up to two million people died under Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge regime, which ruled Cambodia from 1975-1979.

Policies included the evacuation of cities, forced labour in the rice fields and the summary execution of those considered enemies of the revolution.

Exasperated

Three decades of conflict finally came to an end in the late 1990s as the Khmer Rouge accepted a series of amnesties and in some cases even royal pardons.

In return many of the organisation's members took roles in the government and the military.

Even today, the local government and armed forces in Pailin are dominated by Khmer Rouge veterans.

Their assimilation into mainstream Cambodian society had seemed complete and uneventful.

But with the start of the United Nations-backed Khmer Rouge Tribunal in 2006, the former cadres have been feeling somewhat less accepted.

And the genocide charges against the four most senior surviving leaders of the organisation have left people like Sam Soeurn feeling exasperated.

"They're old and won't live much longer if they put them on trial. They should be given amnesty and allowed to live freely. That would bring peace to our country," he says.

Instead Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan and Ieng Thirith are due to go on trial sometime in 2011.

As well as the genocide charges, they have been accused of crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Officials from the special court are aware that there are misgivings about their work in former Khmer Rouge areas.

Pailin was their first stop for an outreach forum the week after the genocide charges were confirmed.

A packed hall greeted the foreign and Cambodian officials, with most of the front rows filled with stern faces in military uniforms.

If the international co-prosecutor, Andrew Cayley, had not been a former army man himself it might have made for an intimidating sight.

"It's easy for me to go somewhere we have support," he says. "It's more important to come to a place like this - where there are former Khmer Rouge members integrated in the government."

Indeed Mr Cayley found himself listening to a speech by Pailin's deputy governor in which he spoke warmly of the former Khmer Rouge leaders, and even described them as victims of Cambodia's long conflict.

But the prosecutor believes that when the trial starts, the former cadres will have to face up to the

reality of what their leaders did.

"Reconciliation is about rebuilding trust in communities that have been in conflict with each other.

"In Yugoslavia, crimes were denied until they were tried by international criminal courts - and in trying those cases and revealing the truth both the victims and the perpetrators gained some relief and satisfaction that the story had been properly told. Ultimately that led to a healing - and I believe the same thing could happen here."

The former Khmer Rouge cadres at the forum were more sceptical.

Some described their former leaders as "heroes and patriots". Others wondered why only the Khmer Rouge was being singled out when many forces committed atrocities over three decades of conflict.

Sam Soeurn went back to his village, his corn and his two dozen-odd grandchildren.

"There won't be any problems here," he says. "We're normal people now."