



KRT gaining support: survey

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June 9, 2011

The Khmer Rouge tribunal is enjoying increasing awareness of and support for its work following the issuance of its first verdict last year, according to a new survey of the Cambodian public from United States-based researchers.

The survey, led by the University of California-Berkeley School of Law's Human Rights Centre, follows on a similar poll from 2008. Conducted in December of last year, the survey comprises responses from 1,000 adult Cambodians from the same 250 villages across the country that were included in the 2008 study.

Some 75 percent of respondents reported being at least "a little" aware of the work of the court, compared with 61 percent in 2008. A total of 81 percent in the latest poll said the court "will help promote national reconciliation", a 14-percent increase from 2008.

"The improvement in awareness is remarkable," said Patrick Vinck, director of UC-Berkeley's Initiative for Vulnerable Populations and a member of the team that directed the survey. "It's a very high level of awareness about the court in comparison with what we see in many other places."

More than half of respondents last year – 54 percent – said they were aware of the court's ongoing first case, that of former S-21 prison chief Kaing Guek Eav.

The infamous warden, better known as Duch, was found guilty last year of crimes against humanity and grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, sentenced to 30 years in prison. With credit for time already served in detention, he stands to serve roughly 18 more years in prison; his appeal against his sentence is currently pending before the tribunal's Supreme Court Chamber.

Some 46 percent of those surveyed said they believed Duch should spend more time in prison; 39 percent said his sentence was adequate, and 10 percent thought it should have been more lenient. 56 percent agreed that victims were not given enough time to tell their stories over the course of Duch's trial, while 50 percent said the accused had been given too much time to explain himself.

The survey said the media "remained an important vehicle for information" about the court, and Moeun Chhean Nariddh, director of the Cambodia Institute for Media Studies, said local outlets had devoted a significant amount of coverage to the tribunal. He cautioned, however, that the television and radio stations from which most Cambodians

get their news may be disinclined to report critically on the court.

Of the respondents who said they had heard of the tribunal, 72 percent said they got information on it from television and 73 percent reported hearing about it on the radio.

“Because most of the media outlets are either influenced [by] or associated with the government, they seem to repeat what the government wishes to say,” Moeun Chhean Nariddh said.

“Cambodian journalists need to be more critical and try to report more deeply on the process of the court.”

The survey was conducted ahead of the recent controversy over the tribunal’s third case, which critics have accused judges of scuttling in the face of opposition from Prime Minister Hun Sen and other officials. To capitalise on the gains it has made thus far with the Cambodian public, the court must ensure that any decision on this case is undertaken and explained in transparent fashion, Vinck said yesterday.

“If [a] decision is being perceived as unjust, then it affects the perception of the court, which in turn affects the legacy,” he said.

“What needs to be done is to make sure that the decision, whatever the decision is, is understood, explained, and discussed with the population.”