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Editorial | Genocide Tribunal

Justice for Cambodia

Cambodians have been waiting decades for justice to rise from the killing fields. Finally, that time has come.

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The country's genocide tribunal last week indicted Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch. He is the first top official of the notorious Khmer Rouge to be detained by the special U.N.-backed war crimes court.

The slow march to accountability holds many lessons for international justice.

Duch, 64, ran a notorious prison that doubled as a torture and execution center. The building is now a memorial to the 14,000 people who lost their lives there. Only seven inmates survived.

About 1.7 million Cambodians died when the radical communist group Khmer Rouge ruled, from 1975 to 1979. The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, killed one-fifth of the country's population in pursuit of a twisted vision of a peasant utopia.

Intellectuals and professionals were executed. Peasants never got their utopia, but at least they had a better chance of surviving: Many among the 150,000 Cambodian refugees in Philadelphia and other American cities were impoverished farmers.

A credible justice process for the Khmer Rouge's crimes has been stalled for many reasons, including a 10-year occupation of Cambodia by the Vietnamese, who ousted the Khmer Rouge from power, and a 13-year civil war.

Long-time Prime Minister Hun Sen also has resisted an international tribunal. That could be because he feared an inquiry might provide damning details of links between members of his government and the Khmer Rouge.

In that fear rests the importance of pursuing justice for all crimes against humanity.

Such trials, once convictions accumulate around the world, hold promise of having a deterrent effect on heads of state who otherwise might resort to grotesque human rights abuses to retain their grip on power and resources.

Dictators thrive on impunity for their actions. They bet that the international community won't bother to intervene, especially if they are in remote corners of the world.

An international justice system that can indict, catch and convict the purveyors of genocide is part of the calculus for ending that impunity and changing bad guys' thinking.

But there will have to be flexibility, even if human rights activists dream of all such cases going before the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

Hun Sen wasn't ever going to give up all control over trying Khmer Rouge officials. The compromise, five years in the making, is a hybrid tribunal comprising international and Cambodian jurists. Procedural rules also had to be worked out with Hun Sen's government.

The court may not have the full freedom of other tribunals, but it already is proving its worth by targeting Duch; Pol Pot's top lieutenant, Nuon Chea; former Foreign Minister Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan, who was president under the Khmer Rouge.

Their prosecution can come none too soon. Pol Pot and his military commander, Ta Mok, lived into old age without ever being tried. Other top leaders, who have been allowed to live freely in Cambodia, are in their 70s or older.

Rorng Sorn, 39, was a child in Cambodia during Pol Pot's reign. Two of her uncles died. She and her sister were separated from their parents for years.

Now director of programs at the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia, Sorn says the prosecutions now are a good thing, but she long ago moved on with her life.

Others have been waiting.

Sorn told of an elderly Cambodian man in Philadelphia whose parents were killed by the Khmer Rouge. One sister died from illness; another walked into the woods to look for food and never returned.

The man said holding Khmer Rouge officials accountable honors the memory of his lost loved ones. It is for them that Duch and others should face public scrutiny and scorn.

Cambodians deserve to hear accounts of how and why atrocities were done from the mouths of the remaining Khmer Rouge leaders. They deserve verdicts based on evidence.

Only then can this bloody chapter in history be closed.