

US Museum Takes Khmer Rouge Notes

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October 26, 2012

A delegate from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is wrapping up a fact-finding mission to Cambodia to create a display about the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge and the ongoing war crimes tribunal to bring the regime's most senior leaders to justice.

Adding Cambodia-specific information would be a first for the museum, placing the crimes that took place between 1975 and 1979 amid a vast exhibition whose primary documents, footage and interactive materials focus primarily on the mass extermination of millions of Jews at the hands of Nazis during World War II.

Michael Abramowitz, director of genocide prevention efforts at the museum, said that including Cambodia would build on displays already in place highlighting crimes against humanity in other countries in the wake of the Holocaust, such as Rwanda and Bosnia.

As for the layout and look of what visitors to the museum, one of the most-frequented sites in Washington, can expect, Abramowitz said the project was still in its early stages.

“We’re not 100 per cent certain, we’re just getting started. We’ll do whatever we do; we’ll probably have photographs, video... we will focus both on the underlying facts of the [tribunal] cases, what happened between 1975 and 1979, but also the quest for justice in the context of the larger quest for justice post-Nuremberg,” he said, referring to the landmark trials against senior Nazi leaders in the latter half of the 1940s.

Abramowitz said there were similarities and differences between both trials.

“Like Nuremberg, there have been many political compromises made in negotiating how the trial came about. But obviously there has been substantial case law since Nuremberg, and the defendants have considerably more leeway to mount their defence.”

The delegation, which included former US Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, and Elizabeth Becker, an author and one of the few reporters to have interviewed Cambodian dictator Pol Pot, visited the notorious Tuol Sleng prison centre, the Choeung Ek killing fields and other sites specific to Khmer Rouge rule.

On a visit to the tribunal on Tuesday, members sat in on testimony that dwelled on the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh. To Abramowitz, the story brought to mind the relocation of Jews from their homes during the Holocaust, their journey aboard trains to

concentration camps and, for those who survived, forced marches under brutal conditions.

Youk Chhang, executive director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, led the group to a detention center and killing site in centrally located Kampong Chhnang province, where the Khmer Rouge killed hundreds of thousands of people.

“This is one of the areas untouched by modernity; it was damaged by war, but the site itself shows the resilience of the people,” he said.

“There are mass graves, prisons and execution sites that you cannot even imagine covered under these rice fields.”

Chhang said the centre would be providing access to documents and historical archives to help the museum in setting up the display.

“In terms of educating the world about what happened,” he added, “the museum can have a great impact on the public.”