



Priest Who Exposed Khmer Rouge Horrors Slams UN Trial
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Cambodia's landmark trial against ex-Khmer Rouge leaders is "a monumental mistake," says the French priest who 35 years ago became the first person to expose the horrors of the regime.

"I deny the United Nations the right to judge the Khmer Rouge," said 73-year-old Francois Ponchaud, who fled Phnom Penh when the hard-line communists took power in 1975.

"The UN backed the Khmer Rouge for 14 years for geopolitical reasons during the Cold War. I don't see why the UN would now give itself the right to judge those it supported."

The Khmer Rouge kept its seat in the General Assembly even after the regime was ousted by Vietnamese troops in 1979 and its blood-stained revolution was exposed to the world.

In 2006, the Cambodian government and the United Nations set up a tribunal in Phnom Penh to find justice for up to two million people who died under the regime's 1975-1979 reign.

Late last year, it began trying former deputy leader Nuon Chea, ex-Foreign Minister Ieng Sary and one-time head of state Khieu Samphan, all of whom deny charges of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.

The trial has been hailed as a milestone event in the still-traumatized nation, but the Roman Catholic priest is one of its few vocal detractors.

Ponchaud says the legal process betrays a lack of cultural sensitivity because it imposes a Western idea of justice on a staunchly Buddhist nation.

"It's a monumental mistake. The Cambodians don't need this trial, invented by Westerners, that causes more pain than it heals. It just rehashes all this suffering that the Khmer people have begun to forget," he said.

Ponchaud believes the country has its own way of resolving conflicts, and "it's not through court verdicts."

"The concept of human rights is a very Judeo-Christian concept," according to the

clergyman. “For a Buddhist, the human person doesn’t exist. When you die, you will be reincarnated.”

But Ponchaud still vivid memories of the mass evacuation of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, when more than two million inhabitants were forced to abandon their homes for labor camps in the countryside.

The priest was one of the last foreigners to exit Cambodia that May. Ponchaud shared his story with journalists upon his return to France, but his claims that a capital city had been emptied of its residents in just a matter of hours defied belief.

Two years later, Ponchaud published “Cambodia: Year Zero” — a book that detailed for the first time what was really happening inside the secretive country.

The UN trial will soon turn its focus on the Phnom Penh evacuation, which is listed as a crime against humanity. As an eyewitness and the author of a seminal book on the Khmer Rouge, the priest could be called to testify.

If that happens, Ponchaud says he won’t hesitate to tell the court his own truth. “If I take the stand, I will say exactly what I think. I will be frank.”