

# The New York Times

## Survivors seek answers at Khmer Rouge trial

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November 20, 2011

With opening statements about to begin in the most important phase of the Khmer Rouge trials, survivors of the regime's violence knelt before a huge pyramid of skulls at a killing field here on Sunday as monks chanted a prayer for the souls of the dead.

Sophany Bay, 66, of San Jose, Calif., has returned to Cambodia for the trial. Her three children died under Khmer Rouge rule.

Chickens pecked in the damp grass above the pits where nearly 9,000 people were bludgeoned to death and where teeth and bits of bone still work their way to the surface during monsoon floods. Signs warn tourists, "Please don't walk through the mass grave." In the trial that got under way on Monday, three senior members of the Khmer Rouge leadership faced charges of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other charges.

They are Nuon Chea, 85, the chief ideologue of the Khmer Rouge movement; Khieu Samphan, 80, the head of state; and Ieng Sary, 86, the foreign minister. Mr. Ieng Sary has stated that he will not address the court, leaving only two defendants to tell their stories at a trial that many Cambodians hope will help explain the mass killings.

The fourth surviving member of the top leadership, Ieng Thirith, 79, the government's minister of social affairs, was excused from the case last week when judges in the tribunal backed by the United Nations ruled that she had dementia and was not fit to stand trial.

Prosecutors have challenged the ruling, delaying the possible release of Ms. Ieng Thirith, the first Khmer Rouge leader to evade judgment after being arrested.

Others, including the movement's supreme leader, Pol Pot, have died as three decades have passed and both perpetrators and victims have aged.

The Khmer Rouge, a radical Communist movement with its roots in the Vietnam War, were responsible for the deaths of 1.7 million people from 1975 to 1979 in a nation of about eight million, from execution, torture, forced labor, disease and starvation.

For survivors, the passing years had become as much a concern as the crimes themselves. "The victims, especially myself, we suffer for too long," said Marie Chea, 60. "Why wait too long, until now? Why don't they do anything? What is the truth? We want to know the truth."

Mrs. Chea, of Ashburn, Va., is one of three Cambodian-Americans who have traveled here to hear the opening arguments, from among about 100,000 Cambodian survivors who now live in the United States.

They were brought here as part of a program of healing and reconciliation by the Applied Social Research Institute of Cambodia, a nonprofit group based in New York that has registered 41 Cambodian-Americans as civil parties to the trial with the right to demand symbolic reparations.

Like many other refugees in the United States, Mrs. Chea has been pursued by her traumas, and she wept as she kneeled at the base of the pyramid of skulls.

“I lost my family, my mom, my dad, my brothers and sisters,” she said. “I suffer, suffer, even when I am back home — I say home because I am in the United States more than 30 years.”

But even in the United States, even after the passing decades, she said, her memories haunt her.

“I always dream that someone is chasing me from behind,” she said. “I always run away. Sometimes I am scared when I wake up: ‘Where am I?’ After I wake up I say, ‘No, I am in a safe place. I am in the United States.’ But I never stop dreaming. I always have nightmares, only nightmares.”

Another of the returning survivors, Sophany Bay, 66, of San Jose, Calif., is tormented by the memory of her three children, who were 6 and 5 years old and 6 months. The first died during the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh, the capital, immediately after the Khmer Rouge victory.

Details of this evacuation and the abuses that accompanied it are to form the first section of the trial.

“We had to get out of here, just my two kids and my baby that I carried,” she said. “They shot into the air. ‘Go, go, go!’ My baby had no milk to feed her. Six months old. She died.” Then her son died, then her daughter. “All my children, they died in my hands, and I took them to their graves,” she said.

Sarem Neou, 71, of Silver Spring, Md., the third of the Cambodian-Americans here, had an unusual perspective on the defendants in the trial: Mrs. Ieng Thirith was her high school English teacher.

“She was a very good teacher,” she said. “Very serious.”

She said it seemed to make sense that Mrs. Ieng Thirith had been removed from the case. “I expect that thing from some Khmer Rouge member in that situation,” she said. “They

are old, and they are human beings and they are under a lot of stress. They might go crazy, become forgetful. I'm not surprised.”

Among the participants in the ceremony on Sunday morning was Bou Meng, 70, one of the very few survivors of Tuol Sleng prison, whose commandant, Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch, was convicted in July 2010 in the first Khmer Rouge trial and sentenced to 35 years in prison, a term that was then commuted to 19 years.

As monks chanted and incense rose at the foot of the glassed-in pyramid, Mr. Bou Meng said he believed that one of those thousands of anonymous skulls might be that of his wife.

Mr. Bou Meng, an artist, survived because he was assigned by his captors to paint portraits of Pol Pot. He said he was now at work on a drawing of his wife at the edge of one of the execution pits at the moment of her death, with a knife at her throat.