



For some NIU students, Cambodian genocide hit close to home
James Tschirhart
April 21, 2009

Justice may come soon for Khmer Rouge leaders

The Khmer Rouge Tribunals are under way in Cambodia bringing justice to those responsible for the deaths of 1.7 million people. While the tribunals are about 8,500 miles away from DeKalb and address something that happened 30 years ago, there are those at NIU who have been directly affected by the genocide.

“My family was affected by what happened, but not only them; every Cambodian lost at least one family member to the Khmer Rouge,” said anthropology graduate student Socheat Nhean.

Nhean is from Cambodia and arrived in the United States in March 2007. He has been attending NIU since August 2007 and is now working on his thesis paper about the Khmer Rouge regime and its chain of command.

From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge, a radical communist group, gained control of the Cambodian government and instated a program to begin the country anew, referring to 1975 as Year Zero. As part of its program, the Khmer Rouge cut ties to the country’s modern ways and removed foreign influence by separating children from their parents, closing schools, killing millions who they thought suspicious and relocating people from urban areas to country farms for forced labor.

Kheang Leang, an NIU professor who teaches Cambodian, can still recall his days as a 10-year-old being forced into the farming camps.

“I saw what was going on at that time, and I still have that fresh memory in my mind,” Leang said. Leang remembered he had lost his youngest sister at the time to starvation, and his father was the only one of 10 siblings to survive.

Today, after 30 years have passed, five top members of the Khmer Rouge are being brought to trial for their actions amidst alleged corruption in the court system and slow proceedings.

Judy Ledgerwood, chairperson of the NIU anthropology department, has researched Cambodia and Cambodian refugees since 1988 and believes many Cambodians will feel that justice is served. But she also believes that many will not be satisfied.

“It wasn’t the top people like Pol Pot that killed a person’s mother,” Ledgerwood said. “It was people of a lower level cadre who still live down the street from that person to this day who may not be brought to trial.”

Nevertheless, Ledgerwood said the tribunals still hold a meaningful message.

“In some ways it’s the world trying to say that genocide and terrible crimes against humanity won’t be tolerated, even if it takes us 30 years to get there,” she said.