



Cambodians testify for war crimes tribunal

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The tiny Cambodian woman trembled slightly and stared blankly ahead as she told the story that has haunted her for half a lifetime: her parents and brother died in Khmer Rouge labor camps. Her baby perished in a refugee camp.

Roth Prom has wanted to die every day since and had never spoken those words so publicly until last week, when five minutes became the chance for justice she has longed for silently for so many years.

"I'm depressed in my head, I'm depressed in my stomach and in my heart. I have no hope in my body, I have nothing to live for," she said quietly. "All I have is just my bare hands."

As the tiny woman in the polka dot blouse slipped back to her seat, many of the nearly two dozen other Cambodian refugees in the room began to weep. They know Prom's pain. They were all there to tell stories just like hers.

Prom, 63, is one of dozens of Cambodian refugees speaking publicly — many for the first time — about Khmer Rouge atrocities so a legal team can use their testimony in an international war crimes tribunal underway in Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital.

From Virginia to California, refugees have spent the past few months pouring out long-suppressed memories to volunteers who fill notebooks with reports of gang rapes, execution, starvation, forced labor and brutal beatings. They attach names of dead relatives, sometimes a half-dozen per person, and scrawl out names of labor camps and far-flung villages where they lived for years on the edge of starvation.

The Khmer Rouge is implicated in wiping out an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians, nearly a quarter of the population, during their rule from 1975-79 under Pol Pot. People died from disease, overwork, starvation and execution in the notorious "killing fields."

Cambodians who fled their homeland decades ago relish the chance to participate in the war crimes trials unfolding thousands of miles away. The tribunal, a joint court created by the Cambodian government and the United Nations, allows Khmer Rouge victims to participate as witnesses, complainants and civil parties.

Depending on the stories, the accuracy of their memories and their own willingness to participate, survivors could be called to testify for the prosecution or defense and those filing as civil parties could be entitled to reparations. At a minimum, all filings will be archived and reviewed by those collecting testimony from survivors.

Leakhena Nou, the Cambodian-American sociology professor at Cal State Long Beach organizing the U.S. workshops, said submitting evidence forms is cathartic for victims who have often kept their trauma secret from spouses and American-born children. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress and have symptoms of severe depression, including memory loss, flashbacks and suicidal thoughts.

"They have a sense of powerlessness, but they have a lot more power than they realize," said Nou, founder of the Applied Social Research Institute of Cambodia. "Most of them have not even talked about it for 30 years. They've been silent for so long."

Last week, testimony in Phnom Penh concluded in the trial of Kaing Guek Eav, who commanded the S-21 prison where up to 16,000 people were tortured and killed. Eav, also known as Duch, was the first to go before the tribunal and is charged with crimes against humanity, war crimes, murder and torture. More than 23,000 visitors attended his trial, which continues in November with closing arguments.

Four other senior Khmer Rouge leaders are in custody awaiting trial set for January. Any testimony submitted by the end of the year can be used by prosecutors to bolster those cases.

The U.N. and Cambodian branches of the tribunal did not respond to e-mailed requests for comment.

Grassroots organizers with backing from the Asian Pacific American Institute at New York University have been building trust within the Cambodian-American communities for nearly two years but still expected many to shun the process out of fear and suspicion.

Some victims believe the tribunal is run by the Khmer Rouge, while others fear if they speak out they could endanger relatives still living in Cambodia.

But Nou said turnout has been high, with some people even traveling from Arizona to share stories at the Southern California workshops held at a Cambodian community center.

"Before, they assumed that no one wanted to listen to them," she said. "They'll say, 'We thought that no one cared, that no one wanted to listen. But now that I know people want to listen, I have nothing else to lose. I've lost everything else already.'"

So far, the team has collected more than 50 statements from Cambodian expatriates at workshops in Virginia, Maryland, Orange County and Long Beach — home to the largest

Cambodian ex-pat population. Future sessions are planned this fall in Oregon, Northern California, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.

They've uncovered chilling stories along the way.

One woman in Long Beach told of being gang-raped from dawn to dusk by Khmer Rouge cadres while 6 1/2 months pregnant. She never told her husband and only came forward last week because he had passed away.

Another recalled being held at gunpoint with her brother and being forced to watch as her father was executed and then disemboweled, his heart, liver and stomach ripped out by soldiers. The woman, now in her 50s, told the story to a volunteer in three distinct "spirit voices," as if to detach herself from the painful memories.

For Prom, the recent workshop in Little Cambodia was a chance to honor the memory of her loved ones — and to get justice for the brutal crimes that ruined her life and so many others. The Khmer Rouge split up her family, she was forced to pull a plow through rice paddies like an ox and her child died later in a refugee camp.

Prom harbors thoughts of killing herself and suffers from memory loss. She's terrified of the night — the time when Khmer Rouge soldiers would take neighbors away without explanation, never to be seen again.

"I try to forget, but it's hard to forget," Prom told a translator who dictated it to a volunteer law student. Prom had already penciled her story on paper in the rolling script of her native Khmer.

"I want to find justice for myself and for the Cambodian people," she said. "I'm here to teach history to the next generation, so this horrific crime will never happen again."