



Cambodia primed for the main event

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For more than a decade, the critics have exerted undue influence over attempts to try the surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge and deliver some kind of justice for the atrocities committed under their rule. Cambodia, they say, is too corrupt, too inept, or just too disinterested to establish culpability for one of the great outrages of the 20th century.

The critics remain out in force, but despite their often hysterical cries about the flaws of a troubled country the main event is about to get underway at the Extraordinary Chambers for the Courts in Cambodia (ECCC).

Former Brother Number Two Nuon Chea, one-time head of state Khieu Samphan, former Foreign Minister Ieng Sary and his wife Ieng Thirith have indicated they will plead not guilty and fight tooth and nail charges of genocide and crimes against humanity once Case 002 begins on Monday.

These four are most important because they are the surviving members of Khmer Rouge committees that wrote and deployed government policies that stripped Cambodia of its cultural heritage and a third of its population.

Money was abandoned and cities emptied as millions were marched into the countryside to work as slave labour. Hundreds of thousands were condemned to death because they didn't fit Pol Pot's vision of a pure Angkorian society.

Muslim Chams, ethnic Vietnamese and intellectuals like high school teachers were among the high profile victims, while people with dark skin – supposedly reflecting time under the sun and a communist approved peasant background – were applauded.

Few could be more pleased to see Case 002 finally get underway than Mek Naing, who struggles to raise his children on a tiny farm on a dusty, remote road about 80 kilometres northeast of Phnom Penh.

The 37 year-old divides his spare time between making charcoal and making sure intrepid travellers who find their way to Omlaing understand what happened here more than three decades ago, and why the local villagers once gave up eating fish.

Mek Naing is the unofficial keeper of M-13, the death camp established by Pol Pot and Kang Guek Eav, also known as Duch, in 1971.

His dilapidated shacks are the nearest dwellings to the site, a three-kilometre hike into the scrub, through thickets, secondary forest and two crossings of the Trapaing Chrab River. The mass graves left behind are impossible to find without the help of a local.

At first glance, the pits and ponds are visually much less dramatic than the Killing Fields of Choeng Ek on the outskirts of the capital – or the evidence of violence and torture on display at Tuol Sleng, the infamous Phnom Penh high school which was transformed into the S-21 death camp.

What made this clump of dirt significant was that M-13 served as the prototype for S-21, with Duch as commandant. Official estimates put the number of tortured and killed at S-21 near 16,000, but sources at the tribunal say fresh evidence indicates that number would now be closer to 24,000.

About 200 such camps were constructed across the country once the Khmer Rouge seized power in April 1975, amid the Cold War power plays of the day.

Much of the evidence surrounding M-13 emerged in Case 001, which last year resulted in a guilty verdict for Duch and the first successful prosecution for the ECCC. His 35-year jail term, before time off, is currently before an appeal.

Among Duch's revelations was the existence of the previously unknown M-13, established in the communist-held zone of Omlaing when Pol Pot's forces were still battling the US-backed Lon Nol government for control of the country.

'It's really important, in the telling of history, what happened 30 years ago,' said Khmer American author and lawyer Theary Seng after Duch was convicted. 'The Khmer Rouge tribunal is now shedding light on this very, very dark period.'

About 300 people died in M-13.

From behind a wall of bullet proof glass, Duch told the court that M-13 was designed to 'detain, to torture, and to smash, that is to kill.' Chan Voeun, an M-13 employee, testified it was here that Duch appeared happy, like a madman, while torturing prisoners. This included hanging a woman from a tree, before her shirt was stripped-off and her breasts burned with a lit kerosene rag.

At S-21, a special unit of female guards looked after women prisoners. Babies were taken from their mothers; water boarding and electric shocks were common. Prisoners were kept alive long enough to have their blood drawn for use in field hospitals. Others were chained to a bed and decapitated. At Choeng Ek, prisoners dug their own shallow graves, were bludgeoned with an ox-cart axle, had their throats slit and bodies dumped.

A Vietnamese invasion ended Pol Pot's reign in January 1979, and laid bare the atrocities committed over the previous three years and nine months. In Omlaing, Mek Naing says

villagers threw a feast once the Khmer Rouge withdrew deeper into the countryside. It was then that the full scale of what happened at M-13 hit home.

‘What people noticed was an abundance of fish, which they cooked, and the smell of rotting corpses,’ Mek Naing says. ‘Men and women were handcuffed or tied to poles erected in large pits that filled up rapidly as the rainy season set in. They were drowned and fed to the fish. Their remains were left in the mass graves for decades, their bones still shackled to the poles.’

‘People then realised what they were dining on, and they swore off fish more than a decade,’ he added.

Two decades of conflict followed the Vietnamese invasion, and another decade of peacetime bickering with the United Nations ensued before the ECCC could be established.

Amid all this, the Khmer Rouge remained a Cold War relic, escaping justice and denying their compatriots a chance to find closure on one of the darkest chapters of the 20th century. That changes on Monday.