



## **Cambodia's Muslims seek justice for genocide**

### **July 17, 2011**

**AFP** - Zakaria Bin Ahmad cannot forget the years of horror under the brutal Khmer Rouge when even praying was to risk death for Cambodia's persecuted minority Muslims.

Many others in his community did not survive the late 1970s reign of terror by the hardline communist regime, which executed Islamic scholars, destroyed mosques, forced Muslims to eat pork and forbade headscarves.

"People tried all kinds of ways to pray. Sometimes while they were driving an ox cart... sometimes in the jungle when we asked to use the toilet, and sometimes while we were washing," the 61-year-old recalled.

But mostly, he remembers people disappearing, never to be seen again.

"Many were killed," he said quietly in his modest home in the shadow of a modern blue-domed mosque, a source of pride for the town of Chraing Chamres, whose earlier place of worship was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge.

Cambodian Muslims, known as Cham, hope finally to see justice as the most senior surviving Khmer Rouge leaders stand trial for genocide at Cambodia's UN-backed court over the treatment of the ethnic and religious minority.

"Now we can tell our story," said Sales Pin Apoutorliep, the religious leader, or hakem, of the Chraing Chamres mosque.

"We fully support the trial to tell the truth and to say what happened under the Pol Pot regime," he said, referring to the regime's main founder, who died in 1998 having escaped justice.

The high-profile genocide trial, which opened in late June, carries particular poignancy for the Cham, whose bloody persecution is an often overlooked chapter of the country's "Killing Fields" era.

Before the genocide charges were filed against the former Khmer Rouge leaders, the treatment of the Muslim minority was rarely discussed.

"In the past, there was little mention about the suffering of the Cham under the Khmer

Rouge regime," said Farina So, an expert at the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam), which researches Khmer Rouge atrocities.

"The Chams' suffering has not been investigated much," she added. "They need recognition from the people."

Nobody knows exactly how many Muslims died under the totalitarian movement, which wiped out nearly a quarter of the population.

But the DC-Cam estimates that somewhere between 100,000 and 500,000 of the country's 700,000-strong Cham community died at the hands of the regime.

"It's still fresh in our eyes," Sales, who lost his parents and four of his siblings under the Khmer Rouge, told AFP after finishing his midday prayers. "Every family has pain."

The mass killings of Muslims, along with an estimated 20,000 Vietnamese, form the basis of the genocide charges against the four Khmer Rouge defendants, who include "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea and former head of state Khieu Samphan.

The four also face a string of other charges including war crimes and crimes against humanity for the deaths of up to two million people through starvation, overwork or execution in a doomed bid to create an agrarian utopia.

Most of those deaths do not fall under the charge of genocide, which is defined by the United Nations as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group".

The indictment file against the four elderly defendants states that "the Cham were systematically and methodically targeted and killed" and that the Khmer Rouge sought to eliminate Cham culture, traditions and language.

Today, there are around half a million Cham in Cambodia, the majority of them followers of Sunni Islam, and they enjoy full freedom of religion.

But like so many in the southeast Asian nation, they remain haunted by the past. "They reconstructed mosques, they revived their religious and ethnic identity, they opened Islamic schools and taught Islam," Farina So said. "They are trying to recover from this trauma but it's a slow process."

Ahmad's daughter-in-law Yakin El, wearing a traditional, long-sleeved dress with matching headscarf, said she was "shocked" when as a young girl she first learned of her relatives' ordeal under the Khmer Rouge.

"I'm pleased that they will bring up the Cham suffering during the trial," the 24-year-old said. "It's the past but I can't forget it because most of the Muslims were killed at this time. We have to remember them."