



Cambodia teaches new generation about Khmer Rouge atrocities

Jake Schoneker

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Transcript

GWEN IFILL: Next, another in our occasional reports from journalism students around the country.

It comes from Jake Schoneker at the University of California Berkeley, School of Journalism. His story is about Cambodia's most recent efforts to come to terms with its bloody past.

JAKE SCHONEKER, U.C. Berkeley School of Journalism: Cambodia is a land in transition, emerging from a violent past.

In the late 1970s, a quarter of the population was killed by the Khmer Rouge. Now a new generation is coming of age and helping to rebuild this war-torn country.

I came to Cambodia to find out how survivors of the genocide are confronting their former oppressors and passing the lesson of the past to the youth who will decide Cambodia's future. For years, the Choeung Ek killing fields have been a place of memory and mourning for the nearly two million lives lost during the Khmer Rouge genocide.

Thousands were killed here and dumped into mass graves. Now it's a museum and one of Phnom Penh's biggest tourist attractions.

This man knows the killing fields well. His name is Him Huy, and he's a former Khmer Rouge prison guard.

HIM HUY, former prison guard (through translator): I killed five people. I did it at Choeung Ek. I was forced to kill them. If I didn't do it, I would have been killed myself.

JAKE SCHONEKER: Huy worked here, at Phnom Penh's notorious Tuol Sleng prison, also known as S21. Thousands of prisoners were tortured and interrogated here before being sent to the killing fields for execution.

HIM HUY (through translator): I didn't know why people were being brought here. I only knew they were enemies of the state.

CHUM MEY, Khmer Rouge prison survivor (through translator): They accused me of

being a spy for the CIA and the KGB.

Chum Mey his friend Summer Ti are part of a small group who survived the Khmer Rouge prisons.

CHUM MEY (through translator): They beat me once for 12 days and 12 nights, until my back was so swollen, I couldn't lie down. I had to be on my side.

JAKE SCHONEKER: Last year, Mey testified at the U.N.-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal, the first ever trial against a Khmer Rouge official. He had come to confront the former chief of the Tuol Sleng prison, Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch.

JUDGE NIL NONN, Cambodia: The chamber finds Kaing Guek Eav of guilty of crimes against humanity, encompassing murder, enslavement, torture.

JAKE SCHONEKER: Duch was handed a 35-year prison sentence in case file one of the tribunal. It was a watershed moment for Cambodia, but it pales in comparison to the court's second case set to begin in late June.

William Smith is the co-deputy prosecutor for the case.

WILLIAM SMITH, Khmer Rouge Tribunal: Case two is different because, firstly, it has four accused. These four accused were in the top leadership positions in the country.

JAKE SCHONEKER: The Khmer Rouge commander, Pol Pot, died in 1998.

But, on June 27, the four highest ranking Khmer Rouge leaders still alive will be brought to trial and made to answer for their alleged crimes against humanity: Nuon Chea, known as Brother Number Two -- he was second in command only to Pol Pot; Ieng Thirith, Pol Pot's sister-in-law, and minister of social action for the Khmer Rouge; her husband, Ieng Sary, deputy prime minister of the regime; and Khieu Samphan, who served as head of state for the Khmer Rouge.

WILLIAM SMITH: These four accused were the designers of these policies, the designers of this revolution, the designers of these methods in which these crimes were carried out.

JAKE SCHONEKER: That makes it the most anticipated trial in Cambodian history. There are more than 2,000 witnesses lined up to testify against the four leaders this summer.

WOMAN (through translator): When you go to testify, only tell them what really happened to you. Don't say whatever comes to your head. Focus on your own experiences.

JAKE SCHONEKER: Many survivors urge the courts to prosecute a wider circle of the Khmer Rouge cadre, beyond the four top leaders. But in a country where many of the

former Khmer Rouge have gone on to take positions in government, Cambodia's leaders have made it clear that won't happen, including the local governor here in Kampong Chhnang Province.

GOV. TOUCH MARIM, Kampong Chhnang Province (through translator): We will try only the top leaders, those most responsible for the genocide.

JAKE SCHONEKER: With so many victims living side by side with their former Khmer Rouge oppressors, the deep wounds that divide this country may never be completely healed.

But the tribunal is offering a chance for Cambodians to understand what happened and to educate the country's younger generation born in the aftermath.

MAN (through translator): The Khmer Rouge regime came to power on April 17, 1975.

JAKE SCHONEKER: The history of the Khmer Rouge genocide is now part of the national school curriculum.

STUDENT (through translator): I know a lot about it because our teachers tell us in class.

JAKE SCHONEKER: It wasn't always that way. Until just a few years ago, textbooks on the Khmer Rouge were banned from schools here. But the tribunal has opened a new mandate for public education. And in the months leading up to the trial this summer, officers with the court have been traveling to schools across the country, reaching out to students.

REACH SAMBATH, Khmer Rouge Tribunal (through translator): Nuon Chea is Brother Number Two. In English, we call him "Ideology Man."

JAKE SCHONEKER: Reach Sambath is a public affairs officer with the court. He lost both of his parents to the Khmer Rouge and attended this school as an orphan in the '80s. Now his own children also attend school here.

REACH SAMBATH: My children didn't know what happened to my parents, their grandparents. So, through the trial Case 002, we believe that a lot of people at their age will be able to learn more about what happened in the past.

JAKE SCHONEKER: For the many students here who lost family members to the Khmer Rouge and the many others whose parents were in the regime, learning about this history isn't just a school lesson. It's the story of who they are.

KUOCH CHOUTIENG, student (through translator): This event is great because we're all Cambodian. We want to know about the Khmer Rouge, even though we're still young.

REACH SAMBATH (through translator): OK, you're in grade 12. You answer first. Why do we need the Khmer Rouge tribunal?

STUDENT (through translator): To pursue justice for the dead and for the survivors, to prevent genocide from happening again, and to teach the youth about the suffering of people in the Pol Pot regime.

(CHEERING AND APPLAUSE)

KUOCH CHOUTIENG (through translator): So many children lost their parents, so we must learn about it and accept it. We cannot escape from it. We're Cambodian.

JAKE SCHONEKER: Before the Khmer Rouge turned Tuol Sleng into a torture prison, the building was used as a school. So it's fitting that the museum is now being used as a place of learning, where survivors of the regime share their stories with the next generation.

CHUM MEY (through translator): They killed children who were only three or four years old. Any older than that, and they were sent to the fields.

HOERNG NY HOUNG, student (through translator): This is my first time visiting here. I'm so shocked at the things that happened here.

JAKE SCHONEKER: This is a trial that will touch Cambodia's young and old. It's expected to take at least three to five years for the trial to finish. And this may be the last case that the court pursues.

But, far from an ending, the tribunal offers a new beginning for survivors and perpetrators of the regime. And its most important legacy may be to help a new generation of Cambodians to avoid the mistakes of their elders and build a brighter future for their country.

GWEN IFILL: Reach Sambath, the public relations officer for the tribunal, whom we saw in that story, died of a stroke last month. He was 47 years old.