

Bangkok Post

Can Cambodia find justice?

June 27, 2011

It will be bustling this morning at a specially built complex on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Officials and judges at the simply named Khmer Rouge Tribunal _ it used to be the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia _ will call the names of some of the most ruthless men and women in history.

Ieng Sary and Nuon Chea are the main subjects of yet another attempt to make the Khmer Rouge pay for undoubted crimes against all of their fellow Cambodians nearly 40 years ago.

One wishes the tribunal and the Cambodian people well in their quest for justice and long legal battle for partial closure.

But the chances that justice will prevail seem slim at best.

Nuon Chea was the morally corrupt "Brother No.2" in the tiny Khmer Rouge hierarchy that ran Cambodia from 1975 to 1979.

He was number two to the late Saloth Sar, aka Pol Pot, the chief of the then-faceless dictatorship that terrorised the nation and killed or was directly responsible for the savage deaths of a million and more Cambodians. Ieng Sary, it is embarrassing for many to recall, was the "sophisticated" and outward face of the Pol Pot regime. He convinced many diplomats that Cambodia was just trying to build a new, agrarian society.

In fact, he believed and stated to closed meetings that the regime he helped to lead had plans to reduce the population of Cambodia from about seven million to one million, because it needed no more.

Since Vietnam did the world a favour and overthrew the Pol Pot regime in January 1979, no Khmer Rouge leader has gone on trial.

The "democratic dictator", Prime Minister Hun Sen, personally arranged for most of his ex-Khmer Rouge comrades to live in peace, isolated but comfortable. The charges against Ieng Sary, his equally high-ranking wife Ieng Thirith and Nuon Chea are unfortunately the exception. In fact, so far, only a torturer who ran the regime's unbelievably brutal prison in Phnom Penh has been tried and sentenced.

Some of the charges this morning are ironic to the world, but a slap in the faces of the inhumanly treated survivors of the killing fields.

Assuming Nuon Chea and Ieng Sary even make it to the dock, given their pathetic claims of being old and infirm, they will face charges of capturing and killing US yachtsmen and Vietnamese fishermen.

During the Pol Pot years, foreigners who happened to touch Cambodian shores were savagely tortured, then killed. But the real crimes of that regime were against Cambodians, and two generations of Khmer are still awaiting some sign of justice.

Ieng Thirith has claimed to be ill for a long time, and may not even make it to court.

The so-called "intellectual" Khieu Samphan, another man who presented a semi-kindly face to the world while helping to kill thousands, has always managed to be too sick to face judges.

Of course all these old people claim to be wondering what all the fuss is about, they know of no mass murders or brutality.

And so far the court system cobbled together by concerned nations worldwide has been a total failure in bringing the rule of law to Cambodia.

Every decent person must hope that after 32 years, there will be some justice for Cambodians, the dead and survivors alike. Unfortunately, the record so far indicates more farce lies ahead.