



**Cambodia: Coming to terms with a violent past**  
**Svay Khleang**  
**November 11, 2009**

Cambodia marked a milestone in its history when the first of a series of UN-backed trials began in February to hold five Khmer Rouge leaders accountable for crimes during their rule (1975-79).

More than punishing a few individuals, providing answers for a nation still suffering from collective post-traumatic stress may be the most vital function of the specially created war crimes tribunal, known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), say experts.

However, rights groups have questioned the independence of the tribunal and accused the government of interference in its workings.

Meanwhile most of Cambodia's population has had little access to the tribunal and lacks awareness of its proceedings.

According to a survey published in January 2009 by the Human Rights Center of the University of California, Berkeley, 85 percent of those surveyed had little or no knowledge of the ECCC.

The tribunal, established in early 2006 and based in the capital Phnom Penh, is a welcome but distant phenomenon for most people, since about 80 percent of Cambodia's population of 14.4 million live in rural areas, according to UN figures.

Moreover, half the country's population is under 20 and never lived under the Khmer Rouge, an ultra-Maoist regime.

Much of the younger generation is unfamiliar with the details of the regime's atrocities, in part because of a complete lack of Khmer Rouge history in schools until very recently.

**Victims' Unit**

According to estimates from most scholars, some 1.7 million Cambodians died from overwork, starvation and murder under the Khmer Rouge's vision to transform the country into an agrarian utopia.

As part of attempts to give victims of the Khmer Rouge a chance to participate in the tribunal proceedings, a Victims' Unit started operating under the ECCC in January 2008, although rights groups say it is sorely under-resourced.

To date, 4,460 Cambodians have filed with the court as victims, providing information used by the prosecutors' and court judges' investigating teams to gather evidence and solicit testimony.

"It makes it more accessible for Cambodians to have other lay people sit in the court and explain the horrors and atrocities," Lars Olsen, a spokesman for the UN Assistance to the Khmer Rouge Trials (UNAKRT) division, told IRIN.

"It also provides essential information to the investigators as they gather research," he said.

The crimes victims describe range from forced marriage and sexual abuse to the murder of loved ones, according to the Unit.

Around half of this group has also filed for civil party status, which gives victims an official role in the court to provide testimony and request reparations.

### **Outreach efforts**

Efforts to make the tribunal reverberate in homes throughout this impoverished country include those of the non-profit Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam)

DC-Cam, which documents the crimes committed under the Khmer Rouge, is seen as the leading custodian of primary documents on the regime and is providing material to the ECCC.

Last month, in the remote village of Svay Khleang in the eastern province of Kampong Cham, DC-Cam workers spoke to villagers about the tribunal's work and how they could participate by sharing their experiences as victims of the regime. Going on record rattled 62-year-old Man Maisan - under the Khmer Rouge, having your name on a list meant certain death, and for her, the terrifying association had not faded.

"Are others doing this, too?" she asked. Despite her initial trepidation, she had plenty of reasons to come forward: her parents and only child died under the regime.

Villagers watched clips of court proceedings, including a confession and apology to the tribunal by Kaing Guek Eav, the chief of the Khmer Rouge's most notorious torture centre, codenamed S-21.

Older members of the crowd gasped when images of black-clad Khmer Rouge soldiers appeared during a documentary on the regime's rule - for many, these figures were in the flesh the last time they had seen them.

"It reminds me of my experiences then, how my parents were killed," said Yim Somlok, 80, who watched the tribunal for the first time like many others in the audience.

"It's good to show everyone but it's also difficult for me to see the children watching such terrible things."

### **Muslim minority**

The Khmer Rouge's reign of terror was especially hard on Svay Khleang, which, historically, had been the heart of Cambodia's minority Muslim community.

It was here, after the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975, that the Khmer Rouge implemented with particular fervour their xenophobic campaign to stamp out identities they considered foreign to the country.

"I'm hoping the tribunal will acknowledge the particular suffering of the Muslim people," said Piyamin Yusoh, 56, the village's current Muslim leader.