



Day of Anger against Khmer Rouge

AFP

May 21, 2009

Cambodians staged a re-enactment of Khmer Rouge crimes at a notorious "killing field" Wednesday as the country marked its annual "Day of Anger" for those who died under the regime.

A crowd of some 2,000 people, including more than 200 Buddhist monks, attended the rally to remember victims at Choeung Ek, a former Khmer Rouge killing field outside the capital Phnom Penh.

Dozens of black-clad students mimed bludgeoning, strangling and eviscerating bound victims just metres (yards) from mass graves where Khmer Rouge soldiers murdered thousands of people.

"This is to remind the world to make sure this kind of regime will never happen again and that those perpetrators must be brought to justice," Phnom Penh governor Kep Chuktema, who presided over the ceremony, said in a speech.

Up to two million people were executed or died from starvation, overwork or torture during the communist regime's 1975-1979 reign as it emptied Cambodia's cities and enslaved the population on collective farms.

Many people were moved to tears by the Wednesday performance at the killing field, and called for speedier trials of five former Khmer Rouge leaders currently being held by a UN-backed war crimes court.

Officials on Wednesday also marked the "Day of Anger" by unveiling the first textbook about the brutal time of the Khmer Rouge, handing out thousands of copies to students and teachers at a ceremony.

More than 1,000 students and teachers gathered for the occasion at Hun Sen Ang Snuol High School, some 8 kilometers (5 miles) from the UN-backed court.

"You all will understand the size of hurt and the cruelty that happened in the regime," said deputy minister of education Tun Sa Im in a speech.

"Before some young people and even some foreigners did not believe that the genocidal event happened in Cambodia," she added.

Very little has been taught about the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, in large part because the topic is sensitive among political groups and other high-profile people who were once involved with the genocidal regime.

Some 500,000 copies of the textbook will be distributed to 1,321 schools across the country. Students are scheduled to begin using the material in their curriculum later this year.

US ambassador-at-large for war crimes Clint Williamson also attended the ceremony, telling students it was important to understand how the Khmer Rouge came to power.

"Although it has not been so long ago, many people want to forget this period. But it is important for none of us forget what happened in Cambodia," Williamson said.

"It is an important lesson not for just Cambodia, but for people all over the world."

UN and Cambodian officials at the Khmer Rouge tribunal said in a Wednesday press briefing that they were satisfied with the court's progress and that the first trial would finish before the end of this year.

Initial trial proceedings began in February when the regime's prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, better known by his alias Duch, went before the court.

Duch has apologised and admitted responsibility for overseeing thousands of executions, many of which occurred at Choeung Ek killing field. However he denies personally murdering anyone.

The court spent Wednesday hearing arguments over the admissibility of documents submitted by prosecution witness and genocide researcher Craig Etcheson, which the defence team said would be "a waste of time".

Duch is one of five top surviving Khmer Rouge leaders detained by the court on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes, with proceedings against the other suspects expected to begin within the next year.