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Film on Cambodia sparks forgiveness

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SALT LAKE CITY — Thet Sambath lost his family to the Khmer Rouge but found peace in Cambodia's "killing fields," the site of mass executions in the 1970s. Now the investigative journalist and documentary filmmaker hopes his personal search for closure can help lift the dark cloud that hangs over his country.

Sambath spent more than a decade making the film "Enemies of the People," a world cinema documentary competition entry at this year's Sundance Film Festival. The watershed work features some of the only recorded accounts from the Khmer Rouge soldiers and officials who committed the atrocities.

"Before I make the documentary, I don't know much," Sambath said Sunday at the Cambodian Christian Reform Church in Salt Lake City. "Now I know the reason. It's good that we have this information."

Sambath and co-director Rob Lemkin shared a clip of the film during the service. In the video, a group of men point out across a field of green grass and palm trees. This is where we killed them, they say, and this is how we did it.

They recall the smell of blood on their hands and how they piled bodies into ditches. "I came here only to show you the truth," one of them says.

When the clip was over, Sambath took questions from the handful of Cambodians at the service. A few of the elders in the room spoke in Khmer as they shared their personal stories and feelings.

Sitha Troyer, of Salt Lake City, said Khmer Rouge soldiers in Cambodia shot her in the stomach. "I cried," she said after seeing the clip, "because I remember." Charlie Phim, the church's pastor, recalled the brutal deaths of his family and his repeated efforts to escape the country.

But Sambath and Lemkin hope the soldiers' willingness to admit what happened will help Cambodians move on.

"It's an unspoken part of the history," Lemkin said. "It's a huge black hole." In talking to Cambodians in Salt Lake City, the film already seems to be having that effect, Sambath said. "They forgive. They can forgive killers."