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Museum also reminds visitors genocides didn't end with Holocaust

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The Illinois Holocaust Foundation Museum & Education Center has a dual mission: remembering the 11 million who died in the Holocaust, and impressing on people that genocide didn't end in 1945.

"We're educating people that the call of Never Again, which grew out of the Holocaust, is an unfulfilled promise," said Kelley Szany, the foundation's associate director for education. "The Holocaust was unprecedented in many ways, but genocide continues to occur."

Genocide -- the attempt to wipe out a group of people -- by definition never happens in a small way. Millions have died around the world in their own holocausts since World War II ended.

The Nuremberg Trials, which brought dozens of Nazis and their cohorts to justice for atrocities by 1948, were supposed to be a deterrent.

But since then, quick justice for mass murderers has been the exception. And justice delayed has often been justice denied.

About 2 million Cambodians died in the "Killing Fields" genocide between 1975 and 1979, but the first Khmer Rouge leader -- Kaing Guek "Duch" Eav -- didn't take the stand until March 30. And only four others have been indicted by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia.

The long delay is partly because the Khmer Rouge retained significant power until 1998. And even then, the government didn't want trials, said Charles Daas, director of Chicago's Cambodian American Heritage Museum and Killing Fields Memorial.

Daas said if only five people are to be charged, they probably got the right ones, however.

"These individuals were the brain trust of the Khmer Rouge, not low-level functionaries," he said. "Duch ... was the commander of the Tuol Sleng prison, basically a torture center, where they exterminated about 17,000 people."

"But a lot of people feel there are so many other Khmer Rouge leaders who could be on trial but are not that they feel justice will not be fully served."

Surprisingly, however, almost half the Cambodian population opposes the trials. After all this time, they don't want to relive the trauma, Daas said.

"The mental health issues were never dealt with for people with family members who were murdered in front of them or taken away in the night," he said.

An indictment of Khmer Rouge strongman Pol Pot in the 1970s might have saved lives, he said. He praised the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant last month for Sudan's President Omar Hassan al-Bashir for his role in the deaths of 400,000 people in Darfur.

"It's what I would call swift justice, to try to take these people out while they are essentially perpetrating genocide," he said. "It will help quite a bit in indicating that genocide is not going to be tolerated in the world, that we're not going to sit on the sidelines and fail to intervene."

Even though Bashir immediately kicked aid groups out of the country, the warrant remains a positive, said Diane Marie Amann, director of the California International Law Center at the University of California-Davis. She leads a joint effort with the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights and law students to draft a matrix for peace and reconciliation in Darfur.

The warrant is similar to moves that worked before, the Libertyville native said.

"Charles Taylor was indicted (in 2003) while he was the sitting president (of Liberia) for essentially sponsoring the civil war next door" in Sierra Leone, Amann said. Taylor took refuge in Nigeria, "but eventually Nigeria coughed him up, and he is now on trial" in the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

She said that accusations of genocide drove Slobodan Milosevic from the Yugoslavia presidency in 1997. "Once he was indicted, people in his own party tried to find a way to dissociate themselves from him," she said. "He had become a liability and an embarrassment."

Milosevic was accused of fostering genocide, but died in 2006 during his trial before the United Nations' International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

Both Milosevic and Taylor maintained tribunals set up just to try them and their associates were unfair. Similar complaints have come over the years about even the Nuremberg Trials -- from two U.S. Supreme Court justices.

In the wake of the Nuremberg and Tokyo post-World War II trials, the UN called for a standing criminal court to try cases of genocide and other international crimes. But it wasn't until 2002 that the International Criminal Court opened its doors in the Hague.

Though 108 nations have signed on in support, its credibility is hamstrung by countries that shun it, including the United States, China, Russia and India.

President George W. Bush pulled U.S. support in 2002, then backed a law to cut aid to nations that join without pledging never to turn Americans over to the court.

Bush had maintained that the court could unfairly prosecute U.S. military, but David Scheffer, director of Northwestern University's Center for International Human Rights, wrote late last year that its rules make such indictments unlikely.

Scheffer, former U.S. ambassador at large for war crimes issues, also noted that the U.S. can add declarations to a supporting signature to protect citizens from malicious prosecution. Other nations have done so.

Despite his refusal to allow U.S. membership, Bush backed the court's plan to arrest Bashir late last year.

President Barack Obama hasn't asked Congress to ratify support of the court, but its backers were encouraged March 18 when he named a special envoy to Darfur.

Genocide Intervention Network Executive Director Mark Hanis said it signaled stopping Darfur genocide was a U.S. priority.

His three-year-old network tries to force corporations and institutions to drop investments that enrich the governments of Sudan and other countries that may foster genocide, but steps away in some cases to preserve Sudanese employment.

"Coca-Cola sells their syrup to local franchises, not directly contracting to the government," Hanis said. "So it's not on our list of targeted companies."

The \$2.2 million organization makes it easy to contact politicians to lobby for legislation to oppose genocide.

"Anyone can call (800) GENOCIDE, enter their five-digit ZIP code and easily reach their representative, Senator, or the White House," Hanis said. The taped voice of actors Mia Farrow and Zach Braff welcome callers.

Hanis, 27, will speak to local leaders and teachers June 23 and June 24 at the Holocaust Museum, 9603 Woods Drive, Skokie.

Two of his grandparents escaped the Holocaust, and were his inspiration.

"The two lessons they taught us growing up was never forget what happened in the Holocaust and never let it happen again."