

## **Is judgment day too late for engineers of Cambodian genocide?**

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Has judgment day come too late for the ailing engineers of the Cambodian Genocide, now on trial at a UN-backed tribunal in Phnom Penh?

The accused are between 79 and 85 years of age.

Some 36 years ago, at the close of the genocide, a life sentence may have meant more to the then-40 and 50-year-old inner circle of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot.

"Personally I think it's too late. They are all old now," said Rorng Sorn, executive director at the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia and a survivor of the genocide, "We were crying for 30-something years for justice."

"Taking those four people to trial is symbolic of injustice, but it doesn't make any difference in my life."

Now age 43, Sorn was only nine years-old when she was separated from her family and relocated to a commune, where children were forced to carry water to canals and fix potholes.

From a rural family, Sorn says commune leaders didn't target her as much as city children, who were often starved and publically humiliated for disobeying orders.

Unlike Sorn, some Cambodians believe a symbolic conviction is just what Cambodia needs.

"I think this tribunal cannot satisfy and cure the trauma of all direct victims and victims' relatives who are still alive, but it is a symbol of justice for victims and a model of criminal leader condemnation," said professor of Khmer and Southeast Asian history at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, Sotheara Vong.

"The trial can frighten future criminal leaders into not committing crimes like the Khmer regime," he added.

The Cambodian government has been working together with the United Nations to try the ex-Khmer Rouge, many of which surrendered in what was a final blow to the Pol Pot regime and given royal amnesty.

Vong believes that two decades of political instability after the Khmer Rouge's fall prolonged trials like the one that commenced this week. But also complicating the issue

is the fear that a legal battle against the ex-Khmer Rouge would lead to the trials of high-ranking officials in the contemporary Cambodian government.

Hun Sen has been the Prime Minister of Cambodia since 1998. In 1976, he was a low-ranking soldier in the Khmer Rouge, but escaped to Vietnam before Pol Pot's fall in 1979.

The Khmer Rouge who fled to Vietnam before 1979 received royal pardons, largely because "These people fled to Vietnam to ask for the help of the Vietnamese government," Vong said, "Vietnam used this group's appeal to drive the Khmer Rouge out. Most of the Khmer victims were then salvaged from the open killing fields."

Vong's own family was saved by early defectors like Hun Sen.

Similar to Hun Sen, former Khmer Rouge Foreign Minister Ieng Sary defected to the Cambodian government in 1996, bringing with him many of the soldiers who fought in the protracted insurgency that followed Pol Pot's fall.

Analysts say that unlike Ieng Sary, there is no evidence to prove Hun Sen engaged in the mass-slaughter that characterized Cambodia's years in the killing fields, but still there are some who wouldn't rule out a trial.

"I think all Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers must have blood debt," Vong said, "On the other hand, they were the power tools of the top leaders. I have never seen the criminal courts sentencing basic level soldiers like them."

"It's hard to say, although legally speaking, those who commit crimes must be punished by the law," said Sopheada Phy, a Cambodia expert and Peace Research Scholar at the University of Pittsburgh's Center for International Studies.

Phy believes that the costs would outweigh the benefits in terms of Cambodia's nascent political stability.

"From a peace perspective, based on the status quo of Cambodia, trying the Prime Minister Hun Sen is no benefit for the country as it will not only debilitate the current Cambodian government, but also create more conflicts in the country," he said.