

Khmer Rouge court's identity crisis

Stephen Kurczy

May 23, 2009

Slung over Nic Dunlop's shoulder on Tuesday was the same vintage Leica he used a decade ago to photograph the Khmer Rouge's former chief of secret police and publicize his whereabouts.

Dunlop was standing outside the Khmer Rouge tribunal where Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, is on trial for overseeing the notorious S-21 prison during the regime's rule in the late 1970s.

During the court's recess, Dunlop recalled his surprising discovery of Duch after a year spent showing Cambodians the solitary black-and-white photograph of him that he carried in his wallet. In 1999, the photojournalist found Duch, living under a pseudonym and working for a refugee committee near the Thai border.

"Duch picked [my camera] up and said, 'Oh, very nice, you like expensive cameras,'" Dunlop said, his Leica still slung from his shoulder. While Dunlop said he stumbled upon Duch by chance, and others say his photographer's eye helped him spot Duch, the accused has said it was God's work.

A Christian convert, Duch told the court on April 22 that Jesus Christ guided Dunlop to Samlot town. "I told Nic Dunlop, 'Christ brought you to meet me'." The remarks echoed Dunlop's account in his book *The Lost Executioner*, where he quotes Duch saying: "It is God's will that you are here. Now my future is in God's hands."

Soon after their meeting, Cambodian security forces arrested Duch and he has been jailed since, but Dunlop has attempted to maintain contact. He tried to send him the books *On God* by Norman Mailer and *The Inner Life* by the theologian Thomas a Kempis, along with letters and e-mails through third parties. All efforts failed and Duch never responded.

"I'm told that he's angry with me still," said Dunlop.

Dunlop remains a central figure in the quest to understand and reconcile what happened under the Khmer Rouge. He is expected to testify at Duch's trial. Along with answering questions, Dunlop is still asking them as he shifts the focus of his Leica from Duch to the legacy of the court.

A movie house in Phnom Penh on Tuesday screened a documentary Dunlop produced for al-Jazeera's *People & Power* television series in February. The film highlights what

Dunlop considers the court's lackluster outreach efforts and its subsequent failure to become relevant to ordinary Cambodians. In it, he visits M-99, a former prison in Kompong Speu province. Duch allegedly sent prisoners to M-99 while chief of the Khmer Rouge secret police and warden of S-21, where he is thought to have overseen the torture and death of possibly 20,000 men, women and children.

In the film, Dunlop finds an old woman living near M-99 who spent three years imprisoned there, waking every morning to bury prisoners who had died in the night. She said she has never heard of the Khmer Rouge tribunal or Duch.

"Her house is less than three hours from [the courthouse] and not one official from the court had gone to investigate" the site or inform the villagers of the tribunal, Dunlop said.

The documentary was shown on the eve of Cambodia's Day of Anger, held each year on May 20 to commemorate the day in 1976 when the Khmer Rouge announced its plan to turn Cambodia into an agrarian collectivization, a decision that contributed to the deaths of some 2 million citizens from overwork and starvation.

This year's Day of Anger also coincided with distribution of the first Khmer Rouge textbook. US Ambassador at Large for War Crimes Clint Williamson and Education Ministry Secretary of State Chemteav Tum Sa Im presided over Wednesday's official presentation of 175,000 copies of A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979) to 1,321 high schools and junior high schools in all the kingdom's 24 provinces.

Despite the new textbook and three decades of Days of Anger, lack of awareness of the long-awaited Khmer Rouge tribunal remains widespread. The documentary cited a University of California study in 2008 that found 85% of Cambodians had little or no knowledge of the court. Traveling around Cambodia, Dunlop said he has found resounding support for the idea of a tribunal, but little knowledge of it. He blames international donors for failing to adequately fund outreach projects.

"I think a large burden of the responsibility to explain this process to ordinary Cambodians lies with the donors," Dunlop said Tuesday. "Only \$50,000 [of the trial's \$143 million budget] has been allocated to this. It doesn't add up. It should be paramount."

Tribunal spokesman Reach Sambath said by telephone that the court has heard this criticism before and is taking it into consideration, but he added that court proceedings are broadcast daily on state television to keep Cambodians informed without public affairs staff needing to visit every Cambodians' home.

"Sometimes you don't need to go from house to house, because TV goes there already," he said.

German Ambassador Frank Mann, who attended Tuesday's screening, declined to comment on Dunlop's criticisms. He did note that Germany had provided \$11 million to

the tribunal process, with one-third allocated to tribunal outreach conducted by various non-profit organizations, such as the Center for Social Development (CSD).

It was the CSD that was responsible for the shuttling in by bus of most of the Cambodians attending the court on Tuesday. The busload of villagers from Prey Veng province said they could not have otherwise afforded the overnight trip to Phnom Penh.

One of the villagers, Sy Siem, 66, said 12 of his family members died under the Khmer Rouge. He said he gets his news from the radio, but he found it difficult to hear the court proceedings daily.

"Not many people have the chance to visit the court and they are only familiar with the name of the tribunal, but ask where it is located and they don't know," said Nou Lon, 61. Asked to name the five suspects in detention, Nou Lon could only name three and then added that everyone knew Pol Pot - the Khmer Rouge's "Brother Number 1" who died in 1998 - was the guilty man anyway.

"When I return home I will tell people about what I saw and experienced and I will encourage people to attend the hearing," Nou Lon said. "For those who really suffered, I believe they can save money and attend the court one time."

Sy Siem and Nou Lon both walked out of the court Tuesday with free t-shirts, free transportation, and a free night's lodging at a Phnom Penh hotel courtesy of CSD. Both said they believed the tribunal is leaving a positive legacy, though Dunlop still questions the effectiveness of a court that the majority of Cambodians will never attend. Lack of awareness in the countryside, along with unresolved allegations of political interference and corruption in the court, all threaten to turn the proceedings into a sideshow.

"I'm still undecided if this is worth something or worth nothing," Dunlop said after Tuesday night's film screening. "So much is said to be done for the people of Cambodia and so little actually is. Very little actually trickles down."