



Khmer Rouge trial open old wounds

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The United Nations-backed trial of former senior Khmer Rouge leaders in Cambodia aims to bring some degree of justice after decades of impunity for their bloody revolution. For the victims, the trial has re-opened painful wounds but also brings hope for healing.

Kup Aishah, a minority Cham Muslim, turns the pages of a large-print copy of the Koran.

Wearing a traditional navy blue headscarf she fondly recalls how she has had this Koran since she was 12 year old.

During Cambodia's bloody Khmer Rouge era in the 1970s, when religion was outlawed, she wrapped it in plastic, dug a hole in her yard and hid it.

Kup Aishah says she was targeted for her beliefs and forced to eat dog meat and pork. She only dared to unearth her Koran after the end of the Khmer Rouge.

She says it is difficult for her to talk about the communist extremists, because in their fervor to form a peasant utopia they killed most of her family. She asks if the families of those leaders were killed, would they not suffer? Did they not have families too?

Kup Aishah is attending the long-awaited war crimes trial in Phnom Penh of four former Khmer Rouge senior leaders whose policies she, like many, says directed the killing of up to two million Cambodians.

They are Khieu Samphan, then head of state, Ieng Sary, the foreign minister, his wife, Ieng Thirith, who was minister of social affairs, and Nuon Chea, known as "brother number two" for his position as second in command to Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot.

They say they are innocent of all charges and Prime Minister Hun Sen, himself a former Khmer Rouge, has said the trial, only the second, should also be the last.

Theary Seng is president of the Association of Khmer Rouge Victims in Cambodia. Outside of the tribunal Monday Seng said the United Nations-backed court - in resisting new cases - is giving in to his government's pressure.

“So, this is what is really unacceptable and disgusting. The U.N. is basically violating its own principle of international standards, its own principle of judicial independence,” he said. “We didn’t expect much from the Cambodian officials but we expected a lot more from the United Nations.”

Several foreign staff at the court in June quit their jobs over the conflict. Court officials deny there has been any political interference.

On the first day of the trial Monday, hundreds of people filed in to watch the proceedings, including Kup Aishah.

Whether or not more leaders are brought to justice, it is clear that thousands of lower-level Khmer Rouge responsible for killings will never see trial.

But critics agree seeing any of the Khmer Rouge leaders in court after so many years is still a step forward in helping their victims to heal.

For Kup Aishah, she says there will only be justice if they are all found guilty and spend the rest of their lives behind bars.