

**Landmark Khmer Rouge genocide trial: Do Cambodians care?**

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Inside a purpose-built courtroom, four elderly Khmer Rouge leaders went on trial here this week in a case that was hailed as a landmark for Cambodian justice under a UN-backed war-crimes tribunal.

But on the streets of the capital, many ordinary Cambodians seemed unsure about what exactly was unfolding and why they should take time out from their daily struggles to pay attention. Others expressed bafflement at the circuitous path of the hearings, the rights afforded to truculent suspects and the tribunal's lavish budget in a war-ravaged country mired in poverty.

"They spent a lot of money. So where is the verdict?" asks Kosal Kong, a motorized-cart driver who lost relatives during the Khmer Rouge's 1975-79 genocidal reign.

In fact, the tribunal last year convicted a prison-camp director who confessed to war crimes. But the leaders currently on trial are bigger names, particularly for Cambodians who lived through that dark period. But a survey taken in December found that most Cambodians can't name the four leaders, though overall awareness of the tribunal was on the increase. A quarter of respondents said they knew nothing about it. In 2008, the equivalent figure was 39 percent, according to the University of California, Berkley, which carried out the surveys.

**Efforts to publicize trials stepped up**

Officials at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), say they're stepping up efforts to publicize the latest trials. "We need to work harder to bring more people to come here. The people are the victims of the Khmer Rouge. They want to know what happened," says Neth Pheaktra, an ECCC spokesman.

During this week's hearings, the ECCC bussed in hundreds of villagers from across the country to watch from the 482-seat public gallery. At least 100,000 Cambodians have visited the tribunal since 2005, said Mr. Neth. Many others have attended public screenings of official documentaries on the court's proceedings.

The hearings are also broadcast live on radio and television, though Chea Sopha, the owner of a roadside café said her customers preferred to watch a movie channel. She said she was too busy to attend but was supportive of putting the leaders on

trial so that Cambodians could know the truth. "It's good to know what the Khmer Rouge regime did in the past," she says.

At another cafe in a bus station, a middle-aged man said the government was using the tribunal to cover up its own actions. He said the Khmer Rouge had killed his mother, aunt, and grandmother, and a guilty verdict for the leaders would not bring them back.

Among court officials and human rights activists, it's an article of faith that justice and accountability can bring healing to a traumatized nation like Cambodia, despite the lapsed time since the crimes. For some victims of the Khmer Rouge, a dwindling population, there is a measure of satisfaction in seeing notorious killers in the dock.

But the idea that a war-crimes tribunal can provide "therapy," as well as justice, is debatable, says Peter Maguire, the author of "Facing Death in Cambodia," who has taught on the laws of war at Columbia University. He says international opinion shifted in the 1990s toward a broader notion of post-war justice than simply trying suspects for their crimes, without any evidence that it works.

"A tribunal isn't a forum for teaching lessons. It's a forum for adjudication," he says.

Lengthy trials that allow ideologues to expound their views can also stoke sympathy, as some scholars have found after the Nuremburg Trials of Nazi leaders, according to Mr. Maguire, though this doesn't apply to Khmer Rouge leaders in Cambodia.

### **Sensitive topics**

For many years, Cambodians knew little about the historical forces that shaped the Khmer Rouge. Teachers shied away from this and other sensitive topics, mindful of political tensions over who did what. Parents told their children of their pain and suffering, but were either unwilling or unable to explain the mass executions, or why some killers still lived freely among those they terrorized.

Gradually, high schools have begun to teach about the Khmer Rouge period at grade 12 using documentary materials from war-crimes researchers. While these initiatives haven't come from the tribunal itself, it opened up political space for teachers and students, says Anne Heindel, a legal adviser to the Documentation Center of Cambodia in Phnom Penh.

Students are "interested in the trial because they learn about it in school, then they come in and see it," she says.

At the Lycée Sisovath, an elite colonial-era school whose alumni include Khieu Samphan, one of the accused leaders, students in the outdoor cafeteria seem keen to know more about their country's darkest chapter. Khon Sovansreyneth, a student in

grade 11, says she's heard stories of hardship from her parents and seen the tribunal on television. "It's important. We're Khmer. We have to know about the terrible history," she says.