



Lights, camera, genocide!

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A new TV show is rapidly extending the reach of the Khmer Rouge war crimes court to Cambodian households.

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — When the former Khmer Rouge prison chief, Kaing Ghek Eav, first took the stand eight months ago, most Cambodians had scarce knowledge of the tribunal that was trying him.

The notorious man — known best by his revolutionary name, Duch — stands accused of crimes against humanity for the medieval torture of 14,000 people at a secret prison code-named S-21 during the Khmer Rouge's reign from 1975 to 1979.

At first, 85 percent of Cambodians “had little or no knowledge” of the U.N.-backed trial that was 30 years in the making, according to a University of California at Berkeley’s Human Rights Center survey.

Outreach has stepped up considerably since the opening of testimony, though. Perhaps no development has been more effective in disseminating the often-baffling work of the tribunal than a new weekly television program. In a country of 14 million, where 85 percent of people live in rural areas, some 2 million Cambodians are tuning in to “Duch on Trial.”

Every Monday afternoon, along with fellow Cambodian journalist, Ung Chan Sophea, host Neth Pheaktra provides a sober summary and analysis of court testimony and the legal framework in which it is heard. Local analysts weigh in on the use of legal strategies by the lawyers and Duch.

“My relatives tell me, ‘You look so serious on TV,’” said Neth, whose program launched in April with British and U.S. funding. “We’re discussing the death of millions of compatriots, including many of my relatives, so it’s not a time to smile.”

The show plays clips of court testimony, including ghastly stories of men and women being bludgeoned, water-boarded and electrocuted before their execution, and of their babies being smashed against trees.

In total, an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died from overwork, starvation and murder under the Khmer Rouge’s maniacal vision to transform the country into an agrarian

utopia. For the some 5 million Cambodians who survived Khmer Rouge rule, the regime's brutality remains deeply entrenched in their psyche.

Today, not even half the country's more than 14 million people are over 20 years old, which means they never lived under the regime. Their ignorance of firsthand atrocities has been compounded by the fact that, until this year, Khmer Rouge history wasn't taught in schools. Many current government officials are former Khmer Rouge cadres and the subject matter remains highly controversial.

Unlike some other international war crimes courts, the Khmer Rouge tribunal hasn't had community-based truth and reconciliation committees to extend its reach to the population.

The hosts of "Duch on Trial" explain how the court is run by Cambodian and international judges, lawyers and staff. How subordinates and prisoners who were under Duch's control and are still alive today provided testimony, and how the maximum penalty for the five elderly former leaders in detention is to live out their few remaining years in prison.

For many viewers, such plain talk concentrated into engaging 24-minute episodes lets them grasp the court's work for the first time.

"Part of the reason for the show's popularity is that before there was a big lack of communication about the tribunal," said Neth. "So we're trying to help fix that."

The challenge, said Matthew Robinson, the show's British producer and head of Khmer Mekong Films, "is how to cram into less than half an hour the highlights of a week's worth of the trial that a group of not legally-sophisticated people can relate to."

Previously, the bulk of outreach for the tribunal had been shouldered by a handful of NGOs, such as the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), the leading custodian of primary documents on the Khmer Rouge.

Through this non-profit group, 10,000 rural Cambodians have been bussed into Phnom Penh to attend the tribunal and 300,000 textbooks about the Khmer Rouge have been distributed to high school classrooms across the country.

The group also makes regular trips to the countryside, assisting people in filling out paperwork to file evidence to the tribunal of crimes they witnessed under the regime's rule and, perhaps more importantly, helping people simply gain closure by gathering details on the fate of loved ones.

For a man whose sister was tortured and executed at S-21, where Duch presided, DC-Cam recently tracked down the order of execution signed by Duch. The man's reason for filing with the court: "So that she is remembered," he wrote.

“The Khmer Rouge left the entire country shattered,” said DC-Cam director Youk Chhang. “We’re trying to help people connect the broken pieces, and without people’s involvement the court is meaningless.”

The court’s own outreach has also been reinvigorated. Since June, hearings that were previously attended by scant crowds of a couple dozen people began to see audiences numbering in the hundreds.

Reach Sambath, whose takeover of public affairs at the court coincided with this boom, attributed some part of the rising numbers to the nature of dialogue in the courtroom. The stories of real witnesses caught the attention of lay people, who found the early procedural hearings hard to follow.

“The testimony was very emotional,” said Reach. “Duch cried. Then the witnesses cried. Then the audience cried. And then I cried. Seeing this is part of the healing process.”

Reach also initiated announcements about the court on local radio stations — a move that had his office inundated with phone calls asking how to attend.

“Before it was difficult for people to have trust in the court,” he says. “But if seeing is believing, then coming to the court in person has people feeling that justice is being provided.”

While such emotionally charged moments provided the catharsis the tribunal wanted to stage, in a country where some 90 percent of the population regularly views television — despite enormous poverty — the tube has proven the most efficient channel for engaging people in the war crimes court.

“It’s easy and interesting to learn about the tribunal this way,” said 51-year-old No Min, who lives in a remote village in the province of Kampong Cham where road access is limited and newspapers are scarce. “I’ve learned more about the [court’s] process and it seems fair.”

“I tell the younger kids in the village to come watch the show with me so they can learn about an important part of history that is easy to want to forget.”