

## **Murder by numbers**

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***Killing Fields: Long Road to Justice tells the story of one of the most vicious regimes of the 20th century – Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge.***

THIS might be a modest estimation, but they are horrifying statistics nonetheless – at least 1.7 million Cambodians (a quarter to a third of the nation’s population) perished under the Khmer Rouge led by its once *de facto* leader Pol Pot (or Brother No.1, as he called himself) during the regime’s official years of rule between 1975–1979.

Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge adopted an extreme form of social engineering on Cambodian society, a form of communism which forced the country’s people to toil in collective farms and labour projects. Those deemed a threat to this philosophy were either executed, starved to death or left to die of disease.

Tuol Sleng, or notoriously, S21, as the Khmer Rouge called it, a school converted into an interrogation centre run by commandant Comrade Duch, where prisoners were shackled to iron beds and subjected to unimaginable forms of torture, saw at least 14,000 Cambodians killed there.

CNN’s Bangkok correspondent Dan Rivers is attempting to tell the story – a side perhaps never seen or heard before previously – of the Cambodian people’s suffering over the last 30 years in the documentary, *Killing Fields: Long Road to Justice* (airing today on CNN), coinciding with the on-going trial of Duch and four of his colleagues in a UN-backed war crimes tribunal.

Rivers, who spoke via telephone from the south-east of France, said that unlike the atrocities that happened in the then Nazi-led Germany, Rwanda or Yugoslavia, the difference with Cambodia’s circumstances is that its own people were slain.

### **Looking ahead**

S-21 survivor Norng Champhal hopes to put the horror of the detention camp behind him. “In some situations, they were killing their own neighbours or even denouncing their own family members. I hope this (documentary) allows people to understand why that happened. The scale of this is simply breathtaking.”

But even at the first hurdle, the trial is being plagued by corruption. While there are no suggestions of lawyers or judges being involved, employees of the court's Office of Administration have described pressure to provide kickbacks to supervisors to keep their jobs.

While there may be no sure-fire methods of stamping out this malaise, Rivers feels highlighting the problem is the first step to a resolution.

"These allegations have been around for a while, but what we have is someone on camera talking about it. This whole thing is like a hot potato at the moment and it's not going to go away soon. I think the most important thing is for it to be exposed so people know," reasoned the 35-year-old Briton.

*Killing Fields* also documents perhaps the most significant living individual in this tale of genocide, Ta Chan, the chief interrogator at S-21. The documentary offers exclusive and previously unseen footage of Ta Chan giving a tour of another Khmer Rouge jungle prison.

While he has not been charged with any war crime, survivors of the detention camp say he was a key player in the administration of the facility.

Rivers tracked Ta Chan down for the documentary, but while the chief torturer hid from the cameras, his family members revealed that they simply want to forget the past.

"It was a big challenge to track him down. He lives in a remote part of western Cambodia. The footage we found from an old video cassette was quite remarkable. The biggest problem we had was getting the tape to work efficiently ... it was damaged and humidity had taken its toll, too."

Rivers has seen much in his 13 years as a journalist, but some situations are just truly difficult to face, and staying neutral in such circumstances has been a challenge.

On *Killing Fields*, the CNN crew interviews an S21 survivor, who watches himself on film of the day he was rescued. Norng Champhal was a young child when his mother was executed, and even with the passing of 30 years, he breaks down in tears recalling the horror of the death camp.

"It is difficult. As a journalist, it is part and parcel of the profession to pick out the facts and truth. While it's an important story to tell, the details were also very harrowing and gruesome. Ultimately though, I hope we manage to provide something new," said Rivers.

While Rivers and his crew never found themselves in any compromising or sticky situations, there were fears of life-threatening proportions. "The main risk was land mines ... this is all part of the Khmer and Cambodian government story. If you look around the country, you will see a lot of people who have lost a leg, so I guess our biggest fear was

accidentally straying off the main tracks and getting our legs blown off.”

Ultimately, *Killing Fields* is meant to function as bringing awareness to the viewing public. “I think people are aware of what’s happened there but don’t fully grasp the scale. So hopefully, this informs in more detail what happened there, and how those responsible are being brought to justice, and also, how some have escaped it so far.”