

UN agency names Cambodian genocide museum a key historical archive

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Cambodia's Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, formerly a prison and torture centre operated by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, has been declared by the U.N. to be an archive of worldwide significance for its historical documents.

The Cambodian government and U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO - opened a meeting Monday to establish a national committee to oversee the museum's operation as a newly designated "Memory of the World" site.

A UNESCO meeting at the end of July in Bridgetown, Barbados, named the museum as one of 35 archives worldwide added to a list of almost 200 that are exceptional historical repositories.

The museum, formerly a high school in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, was turned into S-21 prison after the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975. Of the estimated 16,000 men, women and children who passed through its gates, only a handful survived. An estimated 1.7 million people died as a result of the communist Khmer Rouge's radical policies from 1975 to 1979.

The museum's archive includes 4,186 confessions - often falsely given by prisoners under torture - 6,226 biographies of prisoners, 6,147 photographic prints and negatives of prisoners and other items.

The prison was headed by Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch, who is currently being tried by Cambodia's U.N.-assisted genocide tribunal for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

About 30 people attended the workshop, including officials from Tuol Sleng, the National Museum and the Culture Ministry, government advisers and UNESCO officials.

Helen Jarvis, a government adviser, told the workshop that the archive constitutes the most complete extant documentary picture of the Khmer Rouge regime and an essential part of Cambodia's recent history. It is also being used to provide pivotal evidence at the Khmer Rouge tribunal, she said.

Some aspects of the Memory of the World project deal with man's inhumanity to man, and the Tuol Sleng museum has "documentation of one of the most extreme examples of

crimes against humanity in the 20th century with a major impact on world history," Jarvis said.

UNESCO established the Memory of the World Program in 1992 to respond to the growing awareness of the problems of preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage in various parts of the world.

Its guidelines state that the world's documentary heritage should be preserved, protected and made permanently accessible to the public.