

# The Boston Globe

**Not just Cambodia on trial**

**Editorial**

**April 17, 2009**

WITH THE first trial of a Khmer Rouge figure now underway, the people of Cambodia have an opportunity to make sense of their country's grisly past. The tribunal, created to assess the crimes of a murderous regime that was overthrown in 1979, has been long delayed, and its ambitions are too limited. Even so, the proceedings could embarrass not just Cambodia's current government, but also the United States.

The Khmer Rouge was a shadowy group of Communists that gained power in 1975 and killed 1.7 million people. The tribunal, based in Phnom Penh, is a joint effort of the Cambodian court system and the United Nations. Its first defendant, a man known as Duch, was the commander of Tuol Sleng, an interrogation center where thousands were beaten and tortured to death.

The Cambodian government is clearly undermining the tribunal in several ways. The country's current leader, Prime Minister Hun Sen, has insisted that only Duch and four other elderly defendants be tried, presumably to avoid publicizing any connections between the Khmer Rouge and people in the current government. The tribunal, funded with foreign donations, has suffered from corruption; some Cambodian staffers had to pay kickbacks for their jobs. Anticorruption initiatives should be at the heart of American policy toward Cambodia.

Then again, the United States has a poor record of involvement with Cambodian affairs. In his testimony, Duch blamed the Nixon administration for the rise of the Khmer Rouge. One should be careful about accepting historical analyses from commanders of torture centers, but the critique has some truth. At the least, American bombing helped destabilize the country and radicalize some of its inhabitants, and US support for a 1970 military coup against the country's erratic leader eventually led to a power vacuum that the Khmer Rouge managed to fill. The episode underscores how dangerous it is when a superpower makes decisions about another country in ignorance of its internal politics.

Of course, rehashing the carnage at Tuol Sleng should unsettle a more recent group of former White House policymakers. In paintings that now hang in the former camp, Tuol Sleng survivor Vann Nath documented the torture techniques that jailers used to extract confessions from prisoners. One of them is waterboarding - an act that former vice president Dick Cheney specifically defended. But no one can look at Vann Nath's paintings and conclude that these are acts Americans should emulate.

Cambodia may be intent on sabotaging the tribunal. Even so, the trials can remind the world what happens when political leaders can rationalize anything.