

**DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA
MAGAZINE: SEARCHING FOR THE TRUTH
DEBATE, JULY 2009**

Ordinary People and Extraordinary Crimes

Toni Holness

Temple University, USA

When ordinary people suffer extraordinary crimes, the task of remedying the loss demands extraordinary strength from the victim. Normally, a victim finds solace in the knowledge that the perpetrator will be punished and that the perpetrator's punishment reflects the degree of the victim's suffering. However, in the case of genocide, what punishment is proportional to mass murder? And what measures can ever bring solace to the victims?

On August 13, the DC-Cam staff set out to spread the word about the ongoing Khmer Rouge trials to a Cham-Muslim community in Kampot province. Inquisitive stares, nervous fidgeting and anxious whispers filled the air in the communal meeting hall, which housed over one hundred community members. DC-Cam staffer, Farina So, quickly allayed the community's anxiety with a warm welcoming message and then handed the microphone to executive director, Youk Chhang. The exchange that ensued between Chhang and the community was not only unexpected, it was fascinating.

Ordinary Victims and Perpetrators

The countless books and scholarly writings on the Khmer Rouge create an expectation of momentousness, one might expect to find a spectacle in the victims of Cambodia's gruesome genocide. After all, it was only thirty years ago that more than one fifth of Cambodia's citizenry were brutally murdered. However, the Cham Muslim survivors were anything but spectacular, they were incredibly ordinary. In fact, their ordinariness was overwhelming. The Khmer Rouge victims, much like Duch (the defendant now on trial at the ECCC), are ordinary people with an extraordinary story.

Chhang pointedly asked the attendees if they wanted to watch the ongoing trials. One community member responded with a resounding "yes". Referring to Duch, she said she wanted to "see his face, to see how he could be so brutal." She might be disappointed to find that Duch's face, like the faces of the other defendants and like the community member herself, is ordinary. The extraordinary crimes committed during Khmer Rouge were executed by ordinary people. The ordinariness of both victims and perpetrators begs the question: how can ordinary people overcome such extraordinary suffering?

“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong”- Gandhi

Chhang followed up his initial question by asking community members what result they hoped the tribunal would reach in Duch’s trial. One lady stated that she wanted “the punishment to equal [her] suffering.” Chhang responded that, unfortunately, such a result is impossible. While some community members recognized the need to forgive the perpetrators, in accordance with Islamic teaching, others opined that the magnitude of the crimes rendered forgiveness impossible.

Mahatma Gandhi famously stated, “The weak can never forgive.” Cambodians, however, are not weak. In fact, their very survival of the Khmer Rouge attests to their resilience. Cambodian social fabric, however, remains broken. Although efforts by NGOs and community leaders like DC-Cam and Youk Chhang have been instrumental in doctoring the nation’s wounds, Cambodia is far from healed. It seems that the Cambodian people can only regain the necessary strength to forgive Khmer Rouge leaders if the social fabric of Cambodian society is repaired. As long as Cambodia, as a nation, remains weak, forgiveness and reconciliation may remain elusive.

Reconciliation, therefore, is beyond the mandate and capacity of the ECCC. The extraordinary feat facing Cambodians is that they must look within their very ordinary selves to rebuild the national identity, find the strength to move past their terrible suffering and look toward a future that could be extraordinarily promising.