

# The New York Times

## **Pain of Khmer Rouge Era Lost on Cambodian Youth**

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**April 7, 2009**

TRAPAENG SVA, CAMBODIA — Thirty years after the killing stopped, Cambodia suffers from a particularly painful generation gap — between those who survived the brutal rule of the Communist Khmer Rouge and their children, who know very little about it.

“I used to tell my children the stories, but they only believed a tiny bit, like nothing,” said Ty Leap, 52, who sells noodles and fruit drinks from a roadside stall. “I don’t like it, but what can you do? It really is unbelievable that those things happened.”

For nearly four years, from 1975 to 1979, the Communist Khmer Rouge caused the deaths of 1.7 million people from overwork, starvation and disease as well as torture and execution as they attempted to construct a peasant utopia.

Almost everyone here of a certain age has stories to tell of terror, abuse, hunger and the loss of family members.

“Some older people get so upset at their children for not believing that they say ‘I wish the Khmer Rouge time would happen again; then you’d believe it,’” Mr. Ty Leap said.

As much as 70 percent of Cambodia’s population is under the age of 30, and four out of five members of this young generation know little or nothing about the Khmer Rouge years, according to a survey last fall by the Human Rights Center, University of California, Berkeley.

That ignorance — among both young and old — seems also to embrace the trials of five major Khmer Rouge figures that began last month, a process that is meant, in part, to begin a process of healing and closure.

Parts of the trial sessions are being broadcast and newspapers are carrying reports, but even in this village at the edge of a former killing field 40 kilometers, or 25 miles, south of the capital, Phnom Penh, many people said they were not aware that the hearings were under way.

“I miss some programs so I don’t know about that,” said Khieu Hong, 36, who was listening to a small transistor radio. “If you want to know about the trials you should ask the police or the old people.”

Hun Ret, 36, a cattle trader who lives nearby, said he strongly supported a trial in order to punish Khmer Rouge perpetrators. But he was surprised when he was told that the trials had already started.

Again the Berkeley study seemed to support the perception of widespread ignorance. Only 15 percent of the people it surveyed said they knew much at all about the trials, although that number is likely to have risen since the hearings began. The study was based on personal interviews with 1,000 people during the last three weeks of September.

Beyond the question of age, ignorance about the past appears to be a combination of culture and policy and perhaps also the passivity of a people too exhausted by history to confront its traumas.

The trials are being held under pressure from the United Nations and Western governments in a nation that might have preferred the approach of its prime minister, Hun Sen, who once proposed that Cambodia “dig a hole and bury the past.”

Hun Sen was a mid-level Khmer Rouge commander, though there is apparently no evidence that he committed major crimes. Several ranking members of his governing Cambodian People’s Party and of the military are also former Khmer Rouge.

Because of these cross-currents in recent Cambodian history, the Khmer Rouge period has not been taught in school, causing some teachers who are survivors to feel orphaned by their students.

A new high school textbook has been prepared but will reach only a portion of the country’s students.

“I talk to them but they don’t always believe what I tell them,” said Kann Sunthara, 57, a chemistry teacher. “My father and husband and brother and sisters and many others died. Sometimes when I’m telling about them I have to turn my back and cry.”

Another teacher, Eam Mary, 41, who was severely tortured as a boy under the Khmer Rouge, said he can only catch the attention of his class when he tells weird stories, like the times he was forced by hunger to eat baby mice or lizards or worse.

“They say ‘Eew, disgusting!’” he said. “And at the same time some of the kids in the back of the class are playing and not paying attention.”

The generation gap seems evident here at the former killing field, where dozens of skulls and bones have been preserved in a makeshift memorial — one of hundreds around the country — as evidence that the massacres really did happen.

Some older people say they still hear the cries of wandering ghosts whose bodies have not been properly laid to rest. “They come out at night and frighten people,” said Mr. Khieu Hong, the man with the radio. “They cry ‘Whoo, whoo!’ It sounds like somebody

is being tortured and crying out.” But the children who graze cattle nearby seem deaf to the moans of ghosts.

For some of them, the bones are playthings. Sometimes they stick their fingers into the eyes of the skulls, like bowling balls. Sometimes they put them on their heads like scary caps, the children say. Sometimes they kick them.

But they seemed confused when they were asked whose skulls these were.

“They are the skulls of ghosts!” said Prok Poev, 11, standing near the small stupa that houses the bones. But he added that he did not know whose ghosts these were, and he said he had never heard of the Khmer Rouge.

Sok Dane, 12, said she knew a little more. “My grandmother tells me that in the Khmer Rouge time some people hit other people,” she said.

But that was all she knows, and the meaning of “Khmer Rouge time” was unclear to her.

Chhun Sam Ath 42, a mother of six who lives in a shanty beside the collection of skulls, is one of the better informed villagers. She has a glossy handout about the tribunal although she does not read very well.

She said some children here, deep in their souls, may know more about the past than they seem to.

“I think some of my children are reborn from the victims in the killing field,” she said. “When people come and leave offerings for the skulls, my daughter always runs to get the food, as if they were bringing it for her.”