



Restoration planned for Khmer Rouge dining hall **September 23, 2009**

Poor villagers in a northwestern Cambodian village plan to raise money to help restore a Khmer Rouge communal dining hall to serve as a reminder of the hunger people endured during the regime's brutal rule in the 1970s.

Several panels of the 20-foot by 65-foot (6-meter by 20-meter) wooden structure, built in 1976, have fallen off and pieces of its roof are missing, according to village officials. The inside is empty and has been used as a communal hall for years in Svay village in Banteay Meanchey province, 190 miles (300 kilometers) from the capital.

The village chief, Vy Chhlon, said Wednesday the community's 350 families have decided to pool their money to make repairs so future generations will see where ordinary Cambodians ate meals during the Khmer Rouge era.

The ultra-communist Khmer Rouge moved most people from cities to the countryside because urban residents were generally more privileged than the country's peasants.

Communal living was imposed in place of the family structure, and people had to eat together in dining halls. Food supplies were often low, and ordinary commune-dwellers often faced malnourishment and sometimes starvation.

"This dining hall is a symbolic place for us left over from the Khmer Rouge regime, and we want to preserve it so the younger generation can see it," Vy Chhlon said.

The fundraising campaign will start after the rice harvest ends in February, Vy Chhlon said. Villagers will be asked to contribute whatever they can afford, he said, adding that some of the poorest have already donated 4,000 riel (US\$1).

There are no exact figures on how many Khmer Rouge communal dining halls were once scattered around the countryside, but most have been destroyed by villagers or by natural causes.

During the Khmer Rouge's rule from 1975 to 1979, an estimated 1.7 million people died from execution, overwork, disease and malnutrition.

The former head of the regime's most notorious prison, Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch, is currently being tried by a U.N.-backed genocide tribunal in Phnom Penh. It is the first trial of a former high Khmer Rouge official.

Duch, 66, is charged with crimes against humanity, war crimes, murder and torture. Four other senior Khmer Rouge leaders are in custody awaiting trial.