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Khmer Rouge survivors give voice to their 'silent suffering'

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Cambodian Americans who survived the brutal regime have long buried their nightmares. Some spoke out recently in Long Beach.

At night, the old woman hears the voices of her children crying out for her. She knows they will never stop.

Um Sath is 89, and it has been three decades since the Khmer Rouge laid waste to Cambodia. But she shuts her eyes and furiously taps her temples to show exactly where the genocidal regime still rules with impunity. "We miss you, Mama," the voices cry.

Sath spends much of her day sitting in silence and fighting her mind. For years she rarely left her old clapboard house in central Long Beach. Though she now finds slivers of peace chatting with the other haunted figures at her senior center, she has mostly kept the caroming echoes of the "killing fields" sealed tightly inside her head.

One bright spring morning last month, she let them out -- joining dozens of survivors at a recreation center in Long Beach to face their memories head-on. They wanted to see just a bit of reckoning for the perpetrators of one of the worst atrocities of the 20th century.

Since February, a United Nations-backed tribunal in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh has been trying the first of five Khmer Rouge leaders charged with crimes against humanity, for the brutal experiment in communism that took at least 1.7 million lives between 1975 and 1979.

Activists in the United States are trying to get refugees outside Cambodia to submit their testimonies to the tribunal, in an effort to spur a judicial process beset by delays, limited funds and allegations of corruption. They hope, along the way, that they can relieve the emotional torture of survivors who rarely speak about what happened.

"I'm hoping it will allow them to tell the world what happened 34 years ago," said Leakhena Nou, an assistant professor of sociology at Cal State Long Beach, who is leading the outreach effort in Southern California, home of the largest Cambodian refugee community in the world. "The Khmer Rouge leaders are getting old, the victims are getting old. This is their chance to have their voices be heard before it's too late."

Nou has found that survivors of the Khmer Rouge era living in Cambodia and the U.S. have endured what she calls a prolonged "silent suffering."

"What we're seeing with Cambodians is anomie -- a state of hopelessness and helplessness and this feeling of being disconnected from society."

In a children's day-care room at the rec center in McBride Park, Nou explains to Sath and other victims the importance of submitting their written testimony to the tribunal.

Nou understands this tribunal has huge problems. She knows it won't touch even a small fraction of the era's killers. She knows political forces in Cambodia are trying to limit the tribunal's reach. She knows survivors' memories are fragmented and muddled by trauma and time. And she knows that asking them to condense incomprehensible horrors of that time -- the irrevocable turning point in all of their lives -- into a few quotidian lines in tiny boxes on a government form borders on cruel farce.

Description of crime. Date. Who do you believe is responsible for these crimes and why do you believe this?

Nou hasn't even been assured that prosecutors will read the forms. But she still hopes this could be a starting point for Cambodians around the world to rally for justice.

She asks the survivors whether, before filling out the forms, they want to get their stories out into the open and tell them to the group.

A slight, pale figure in a checkered coat stands up. Sath's eyes crinkle before she speaks.

She and her husband were farmers and merchants in the rich land along the Mekong River, south of Phnom Penh. In the middle class, with enough money to own a modest brick house, they were targets when the Khmer Rouge swept into power in 1975, brutally turning the country into a collective society of farm peasants. Intellectuals, teachers, doctors, businessmen, government bureaucrats and army soldiers were executed en masse.

Khmer Rouge soldiers showed up at Sath's home with rifles, took her husband away and told her to start walking with her eight children. "Just walk," she recalls. Mother and children had nothing but their clothes.

The countryside was crowded with people treading the rutted roads. Sath held her 6-year-old boy's hand. Everyone was silent.

For days they wandered, following orders. Anyone who complained or asked questions was dismissed by a bullet to the back of the head.

The soldiers barked questions about her husband at Sath: Why did he travel to Phnom Penh so often? Did he work for the national police?

She told them they were just poor people, doing nothing.

They let her and her children return to where she had lived. The family reunited with her husband and stayed for a month. Their house had been burned to the ground -- just a pile of bricks and the skeleton of a stairway. They slept on the ground. There was no food, and they nearly starved, eating only watery rice soup.

The soldiers forced them back on the road, this time to a work camp near Pursat, where they lived on the dirt floor of a straw hut. The family was emaciated, working to exhaustion in the rice fields day after day.

There were no clocks or calendars, just a malignant silence. Time was elastic and unmoored, like in a nightmare.

The smell of death

One day, soldiers came and locked Sath in chains and took her husband away. She said nothing. Days later she overheard soldiers casually mention his execution. She reeled, but kept it inside for her children.

They came again, in the rice paddy. They asked the children all sorts of questions about their parents. They were kids; they didn't know what they needed to lie about. They said their dad traveled back and forth. They said they had had servants.

The soldiers took her three sons -- two in their late teens, and the 6-year-old.

Some time later, Sath heard that other villagers had seen the boys' clothes in the plowed-up dirt where bodies were routinely buried.

They came for her next. They took her to the same field and beat her unconscious. She woke up naked, amid decaying bodies and the smell that, decades later, could bring every fine grain of this horror back to life. She made it back to her hut, surviving several more near-death moments before Vietnamese soldiers ousted the Khmer Rouge in 1979.

So now she stands in this children's playroom, with its drawings of Cookie Monster and Nemo the clown fish, and the words pour out too fast for the translator to keep up. Sath's eyes are fixed on the middle distance.

"I lost my sons, my grandson. They took my husband away right in front of me. They killed my husband. They took my brothers and sisters away. They were all killed by the Khmer Rouge."

The anguish in her face tells of the unspeakable loss in her heart. A man in a gray suit pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his eyes. Another takes his glasses off and pinches the bridge of his nose. Women choke back sobs.

Sath thanks everyone profusely for listening.

A stout little woman in a red floral dress and white sandals takes the microphone next. Her face is swollen with emotion before she can speak.

Born Pach, now 40, was a child when the black-clad soldiers came for her parents. They told her they needed to be "re-educated."

They sent Pach to a camp in the province of Battambang to cut rice. She begged to see her parents. But they shouted at her, no, she would not see them again.

One day, the guards accused her of stealing a rooster and beat her. Another time, when she was ill, they accused her of being lazy and sliced the top and side of her head with a knife, and then stuck a burning piece of metal in her rectum.

She saw them slit other children's throats, or club them to death.

Dreams, nightmares

Pach survived the Khmer Rouge and made it to Long Beach in 1989. She lives alone in a tiny Section 8 apartment, watching Cambodian karaoke shows behind a steel security screen door, venturing out mostly just to collect cans. She had a boyfriend for several years. They had a wedding ceremony in Las Vegas, but they never made it official and he left her for someone else years ago. The photos of his family hang on her wall. They're all she ever had.

On her mini-fridge, she has a small shrine for her parents, with Buddhist statuettes, incense she keeps burning and cans of soda for them to drink. She dreams that her mother is talking to her, telling her to take care of herself. She can still see her face.

Pach has sought counseling for depression, but never kept up with it. She has nightmares that she is being burned alive. She thinks Khmer Rouge spies live in her building and record her every word.

But she says she is not afraid of them. She wants her torturers to go to prison.

"The Khmer Rouge killed my parents when I was 5 or 6 years old," she cries at the rec center. "I wanted to see my parents so much, but the Khmer Rouge wouldn't let me. They tied me up. They said, 'No, you can't see your parents.' "

She recounts her injuries, in between shallow breaths, and sits down.

Viasnah Cragh, 58, steps up and tells how the Khmer Rouge shot her sister-in-law in the head as she begged for her husband's life. Her story follows no chronology, just the messy onslaught of images in her head.

She recalls someone executed for complaining about mosquitoes. She tells of giving birth twice, being forced into the rice paddies immediately and coming home to find the newborns unfed -- and dead. She remembers dead bodies left unburied for the dogs to eat, and the carnivores' otherworldly howling at night. She remembers the ghostly silence of daylight.

She describes her husband, starving, falling off a footbridge into the water while carrying a bag of rice.

"I asked for him to be rescued," she says. "They said, 'Why are you so possessive? Your husband is no longer your husband! Your children are no longer your children! You just need to focus on your work.' "

She describes how they killed children with clubs to save bullets. The adults quickly learned to be silent. The children couldn't help themselves. Cragn constantly hears their screaming -- Mommy, Daddy, help me! -- to this day.

Cragn looks at everyone, desperate, beseeching, alone.

"I live here," she says. "I walk around. But I feel like I'm a person living without a soul."

Digging deep

The levee is broken and the stories are pouring out. One woman gets a roll of paper towels to hand around to wipe the tears.

When they get to the forms, 21 people fill them out. No one remembers dates. Places are vague. Only one victim names an alleged perpetrator. The rest do not remember their tormentors' names, never knew them, or are still scared.

A week later, Cragn says she feels that a great pain -- a physical pressure she carried in her chest -- has been lifted by telling her story that day.

"Ever since I did what I did Friday, I feel like there's nothing left of it," she says. "I don't know where it all goes."

But pain has its own strata, and some layers are too deep to unearth. She didn't tell everything that day. She told of other people getting tortured. When asked about her own torture, tears stream down to her jaw before her face is wrung in agony.

"I can't talk about that," she cries.