



Washington vigil held for Khmer Rouge victims

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More than 60 human rights and democracy activists gathered before the White House in Washington to remember Cambodians who lost their lives during the Khmer Rouge's brutal rule and called for an urgent trial of the regime's surviving leaders.

"We are here at the candle light vigil today to pay our respects to the souls of our countrymen who died during the Khmer Rouge's genocidal regime and to pray that their souls and all the sacred spirits push the Khmer Rouge tribunal to move forward quickly," said Yap Kimtung, president of the Cambodian-Americans for Human Rights and Democracy, a lead organizer of the ceremony. "We want to have a fair trial and wish that this cruel regime does not return." The activists came from states around Washington, such as Virginia and Maryland; some of them came all the way from Philadelphia, Texas, Ohio, California and New York.

"I am so happy that we Khmers can get together as one to remember those who died during the genocidal regime," Dara Kas, who came all the way from California, told VOA Khmer. "I am very much pleased to see that Khmers are helping each other."

Dara Kas expressed her excitement and said she wished to see the Khmer Rouge tribunal come to an end as soon as possible.

With a flickering candle in his hands, Phuong Sodarith, who lost his parents and grandparents, told the assembled crowd of the suffering his family received under the Khmer Rouge and expressed his wish to see no more genocide in Cambodia or the world.

"I am here today to remember those who died and would like to appeal to the world not to repeat its history," he said. "Nowadays, history seems to repeat itself, because there are still more killings. Therefore, I don't want the world to experience more killings like in Cambodia."

The candlelight vigil was organized by four Khmer associations in the US. It was joined by activists from the Genocide Prevention Project and the Save Darfur Coalition.

"We are very much here to support justice," Allison Johnson, the international campaign manager of the Genocide Prevention Project, told VOA Khmer. "Thirty-four years is a

very long time, and some of the people who are being tried are getting quite old, so justice is very important, very important.”

The Khmer Rouge came to power on April 17, 1975, after toppling the US-backed regime of Gen. Lon Nol. In less than four years, the communist movement was responsible for the loss of nearly 2 million lives through starvation, hunger, overwork, torture and execution.

Currently, five surviving Khmer Rouge leaders—chief ideologue Nuon Chea, head of state Khieu Samphan, foreign minister Ieng Sary, his wife, Ieng Thirith, minister of social affairs, and S-21 prison director Kaing Kek Iev—are in detention awaiting trials by a UN-Cambodia hybrid court.

In addition to the vigil, participants viewed a film screening of “New Year Baby,” the story of filmmaker Socheata Poeu, who was born in a Thai refugee camp in the aftermath of the Cambodian genocide.

Poeu grew up in the United States without knowing of her parents’ experiences during the Khmer Rouge. After a startling family revelation, Socheata Poeu travels to Cambodia in search of the truth about her parents’ secret past.

“I hope that the movie helps families open a conversation about their own family history, their own personal story of what happened to them during the Khmer Rouge period,” Socheata Poeu told VOA Khmer. “I hope that the movie helps the families begin to remember again, and also not be so afraid to talk about their own stories, and to celebrate the fact that they did survive and they were able to build new lives for themselves.”

April is being remembered as Genocide Prevention Month. There are more than 250 events planned during the month to remember six genocides that have occurred from World War II and beyond: those in Darfur, western Sudan, Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Armenia, as well as the Jewish Holocaust.