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A small measure of justice in Cambodia

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Last week in a Cambodian courtroom, I watched as the former commandant of the Khmer Rouge's notorious Tuol Sleng prison and torture center was sentenced to 35 years in prison for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

During Monday's 70-minute session, the former executioner, now a born-again Christian, listened attentively from the dock, holding what appeared to be a small Bible. "If you want to stone me to death, as they did when Christ was with us, the Cambodian people can do so and I will accept it," he told the tribunal during his trial. But he also asked for mercy.

Kang Kek Ieu — known in tribunal filings as Kaing Guek Eav but best known by his revolutionary name, Comrade Duch — fled Phnom Penh when the Vietnamese invaded and deposed the Khmer Rouge in 1979. He remained at large for more than 20 years until he was found, working for a Christian aid agency, by Irish photographer Nic Dunlop.

To many survivors of the Khmer Rouge era, last week's sentence seemed far too light for a man who was "addicted to the sight of blood," as one of them described Duch in trial testimony. After taking into account the time he's already served and other considerations, he is likely to serve 19 more years, which leaves the distinct possibility that the 67-year-old will live to see freedom again.

Is that too lenient a sentence? Probably. But it's hard not to also think about how the culpability for Cambodia's horror extends far beyond one prison commander.

The first time I saw Cambodia was during the American "incursion" in the spring of 1970. Flying over the country in a rickety Vietnamese helicopter, I beheld a landscape pocked with craters, the result of the secret bombing that had been ordered by President Nixon and his

national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, in 1969.

Some commentators have wondered since just how much the American bombings, which killed tens of thousands of Cambodians before being stopped by Congress in 1973, had to do with the ferocity of the Khmer Rouge, under whose rule an estimated 1.7 million people were put to death or died of hunger or overwork.

In 1979, I went to Phnom Penh as part of a press tour for half a dozen Western journalists who had been brought to see the "new" Cambodia. But everywhere we looked were signs of the despot Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge.

In the countryside, skinny oxen pulled wooden carts along mine-laden and bomb-blasted roads. In the city, mountains of wrecked automobiles stood alongside hillocks of rusting refrigerators, unacceptable bourgeois toys in Pol Pot's "glorious" Democratic Kampuchea.

At one point, having evaded our minders, we came across a handful of ordinary Cambodians who had crept past government barriers into Phnom Penh. They were kneeling in tattered clothes on the ground picking up individual grains of rice. The pathetic cavalcade of skeletons smiled shyly at a couple of foreigners before hauling themselves to their feet and tottering off, as if they felt their suffering was an eyesore to us.

Among the places we visited on that trip was Tuol Sleng, also known as the S-21 prison, where Duch had ordered the killing of thousands of Cambodians. Blood was still congealed on the prison floor when we visited, and it felt as if the last desperate scream still hung in the air. The whole awful place stank of death, fear and neglect.

Today, of course, Phnom Penh is a very different place, a busy city full of bars and restaurants. For decades, Cambodians have wanted to forget the past and move on with life, and it remains to be seen whether the government will muster the will to aggressively prosecute other war criminals. Only recently have young people even been taught much about the Khmer Rouge regime.

But as I watched Duch's sentencing last week, I found the past hard to forget. I remembered speaking to a mother and her 11-year-old son in 1979, soon after Pol Pot's ouster. The boy had lost both his legs in a mine blast while watching their cow. And he wasn't alone.

"The children of Cambodia have no legs," his mother, half-demented with grief, told me.

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