

# The Washington Post

## **Closure for Cambodia** **Katherine Marshall** **August 2, 2010**

Phnom Penh was hot, noisy, and bustling last week. Cars, motorcycles, and the ubiquitous tuk tuks (motorcycle taxis) raced through the city with perpetual near collisions. Markets were full. Children were everywhere. There were clouds gathering, but the coming storms of the rainy season held off.

The talk of the town was the long-awaited verdict in the international trial of Kaing Guek Eav, alias Commandant Duch, announced on July 26 by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, a joint United Nations-Cambodian Government tribunal set up to try some of the leaders responsible for the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia. Thirty years have passed, so it's high time to bring the surviving perpetrators to account. The trial of Duch is the first to come to a conclusion.

Duch's conviction was not in question. He was in charge of the notorious Tuol Sleng prison, where somewhere between 12,000 and 20,000 plus people entered, to be registered, tortured, and sent to their death. Fewer than ten who entered are thought to have emerged alive. Duch was renowned for his meticulous attention to detail - incredible records survive - and his cruelty. He acknowledged what he had done; his lame defense was that he was following orders. A convert to Christianity, he held out his faith and the good he said he has done since the Khmer Rouge period as character evidence.

Duch was sentenced to 35 years in prison, but with two reductions, the first to compensate for a period when he was held illegally, and for time served. The bottom line is 19 more years to serve.

The first reaction was outrage at the lightness of the sentence. Duch is now 67 so he is likely to die in prison, but still the sentence seemed almost an insult. But there is also a complex sense of pride that the trial took place. While an initial reaction is to want Duch to suffer at least a fraction of the torment he inflicted on his victims, many in this country permeated with Buddhist thinking take satisfaction that he will suffer horribly in a future life. Vengeance does not seem high on the agenda and many who hold prominent positions have some shadows in their past that they would

just as soon leave be.

There was outrage also that the tribunal essentially ducked all issues of reparations, arguing that it had no way to enforce such awards. Page after page of motions for memorials and other steps were dismissed on those grounds. That, surely, is unfinished business for Cambodia, as a government and a people.

The monumental effort to ensure justice that the long verdict report reflects gets some credit. So does the fact that the glacial process does represent a route to come to terms with the past. The proceedings have been televised, and the newspapers have reported on witness after witness over the long life of the trial. But so far only one man has been in the dock. Four more are slated for trials, but most former Khmer Rouge live normal lives. Cambodian children are taught little about what happened, much less why, so they grow up with an uneasy sense of storms left behind.

Closure in the Duch case is a milestone but only a first step toward the reconciliation that needs to occur among the survivors and the perpetrators. Many programs work to address this challenge, including the remarkable Documentation Center of Cambodia led from Yale University and village by village programs in Cambodia, like those of the International Center for Conciliation. But the efforts are barely scratching the surface.

Many Cambodians want to look to the future and relegate the past to some distant drawer. But the heavy clouds are there, and it often feels as if a new storm could break. Pained memories and buried anger are very much part of Cambodian reality today. The multiple efforts to face it, with justice, compassion and understanding, are not only desirable. They are essential.

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