

Comrade Duch and the Killing Fields
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Late last month in Cambodia, Kaing Guek Eav—the killer known to all Cambodians as Comrade Duch—was finally convicted. The former commandant was found guilty by a U.N.-backed tribunal of crimes against humanity in the sadistic murders of at least 14,000 of his countrymen. He was sentenced to 35 years in prison.

Though his conviction was a milestone for Cambodians who have waited years for some form of credible justice, many genocide survivors, including me, felt the punishment was far too soft given the severity of his crimes. After the Extraordinary Chambers—as the tribunal is formally known—deducted five years to redress violations of his rights when he was held illegally in prior military detention, and 11 years for the time he's already served, Comrade Duch would only serve 19 years behind bars: 11 hours of imprisonment for each person he slaughtered.

Yesterday came the welcome news that the prosecutors are appealing his sentence on the grounds that it's too lenient. Cambodians are heartened by the appeal but hope that it will not cause undue delays to the more pressing matter: the case against the "senior" Khmer Rouge leaders, the core of the Extraordinary Chambers's mission.

Since Vietnam invaded Cambodia and ended the Khmer Rouge regime in January 1979, these killers wandered the country with impunity thanks to Cold War rivalries among various communist regimes. Beijing supported the Khmer Rouge, its satellite, financially and militarily. But the Soviet Union, sworn enemy of China, supported Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. Meanwhile, still smarting from the Vietnam War and viewing China as an indispensable ally, the U.S. backed a coalition government of Khmer Rouge and non-Communist Cambodian forces with Prince Norodom Sihanouk as its nominal head.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about a peace agreement in 1991 with the participation of all Cambodian factions—including the Khmer Rouge. It would take until June 2003 for the U.N. and the government to establish the Extraordinary Chambers. It was just four years ago that it began to try the mass murderers of 1975-1979.

Comrade Duch was the commandant of only one Khmer Rouge detention center (Tuol Sleng) and only one killing field (Choeung Ek). There were at least 200 detention centers and thousands of killing fields spread across the country. Phnom Penh was not the only crime scene: Almost every rice field, pagoda and school in the country became a site for slaughter.

The Khmer Rouge rounded up their victims—mainly fellow Cambodians evacuated from the capital and major towns—on the grounds that they were tainted by Western imperialism. They gathered them in the middle of the night for mass execution into graves usually dug by the victims the day before.

Bullets were saved for the war against Vietnam. Instead the Khmer Rouge butchered and whacked their own people from behind at the stem of the neck with crude farm instruments like hoes. Those who didn't die immediately were asphyxiated under the bodies piled on top of them in mass graves.

Other detention centers resulted in more deaths than the 14,000 carried out by Comrade Duch at Tuol Sleng. For example, in the Boeung Rai detention center in the heart of the "Eastern Zone" where I was detained as a 7-year-old child, the Khmer Rouge killed 30,000 people including my mother. Every night the guards chained the ankles of all the prisoners. They tried to chain my ankles, but they were too bony and I could slip in and out of the shackles. My job at night was to bring the toilet bucket to other immobile prisoners. One night, a crazy woman in our cell screamed "I'm thirsty! I'm thirsty!" and drank from the bucket. Later, the guards murdered her by squeezing her head with a coconut cruncher to pass the time.

Comrade Duch is "most responsible," according to the Tribunal, for the 14,000 lives stamped

out at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek. But he was not a "senior" Khmer Rouge leader and should not be made the sole scapegoat of this genocidal regime that murdered 1.7 million people.

The heart of the Extraordinary Chambers is the highly anticipated Case 002, the trial of senior Khmer Rouge leaders. (Comrade Duch's was Case 001.) We must press forward to ensure that Case 002 goes to trial as soon as possible.

Should this Cambodian government make Comrade Duch the sole scapegoat by obstructing the start and completion of Case 002, the tribunal will be considered a failure for the millions of dollars wasted and the irreversible cynicism it has embedded in a society already fractured by fear. If that is the case, let the record show that we survivors have registered our deep disappointment.

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