

Extra Feature Story

Decades After Cambodian Genocide, Khmer Rouge Leaders Face Trial

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The first of five Khmer Rouge leaders will appear before a tribunal next week for committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979.

In an attempt to establish an extreme form of communism based on peasant labor, the Khmer Rouge is considered responsible for the deaths of at least 1.7 million people through torture, starvation and execution.

The first trial will begin next week for Kaing Guek Eav, former leader of the Khmer Rouge's largest torture center Tuol Sleng, where at least 14,000 people were killed. Four other senior Khmer Rouge officials are currently detained and under investigation.

Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in 2006 that the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge "were of a character and scale that it was still almost impossible to comprehend."

"The victims of those horrific crimes have waited too long for justice," he added.

A classless society?

The Cambodian communist party Khmer Rouge rose to power in 1975 by positioning themselves as defenders of the peasant class and in opposition to American involvement in Southeast Asia and Vietnamese occupation of parts of Cambodia.

Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge extolled the virtues of the rural farming classes while objecting to any group that they associated with capitalist class ideology – including people from the cities, teachers, and working professionals.

Dreaming of a utopian farming society, the Khmer Rouge moved much of Cambodia's urban population to the countryside to work in agricultural labor camps where many people died from exhaustion, starvation and sickness.

Although most of the Khmer Rouge leaders were middle-class graduates of foreign universities, they hoped to turn Cambodia into a classless society by eliminating private property and forcing people to work on farming communes.

They made a distinction between "old people," the preexisting farming class, and "new people," former city-dwellers. The "new people" were subject to much harsher treatment, living and working in the most laborious, unsanitary and dangerous conditions.

The 'Killing Fields'

The Khmer Rouge leadership tortured and executed many people for sympathizing with suspected "enemy" groups like foreign governments, religious institutions and intellectuals.

After interrogation and torture at a prison like Tuol Sleng, the accused and their families were often brought to so-called "Killing Fields," sites where mass executions took place.

One of the most infamous sites is Choeung Ek, where thousands of people were executed with pickaxes and buried together in large graves. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, almost 9,000 bodies were discovered at Choeung Ek and today, around 5,000 skulls of the executed are on display at the site as a memorial to the dead.

Delayed justice

Following an invasion from the Vietnamese in 1979, the Khmer Rouge lost power but remained in tact as a fringe group until 1996, when Pol Pot formally disbanded the group.

Economic troubles and political wrangling delayed the arrangement of a court to try the perpetrators of the Cambodian genocide. The Cambodian government finally approved a mix of local and United Nations judges to oversee the tribunal in 2006, three decades after the Khmer Rouge's crimes took place.

Called the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, the court will try the five officials under both Cambodian and international criminal law.

Along with Kaing Guek Eav – commonly known as Duch – the court will also try 82 year-old second-in-command Nuon Chea, and former Chief of State, Khieu Samphan, who recently suffered a stroke.

Former Foreign Minister Ieng Sary and his wife former Deputy Prime Minister Ieng Thirith will also appear before the tribunal.

Human rights groups have criticized the length of time it has taken to prosecute the accused, worrying that the Khmer Rouge officials will die before they can be brought to justice. The Khmer Rouge's most notorious leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998.

-- Compiled by Kate Stanton for NewsHour Extra

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