



Khmer Rouge tribunal keeps the country informed

Robert Carmichael

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The ongoing Khmer Rouge tribunal here of Kaing Guek Eav, known as Comrade Duch, has heard some highly charged testimony in recent weeks, as civil parties have told the court of how the murders of their loved ones ruined their lives.

On Aug. 17 it was the turn of French national Martine Lefevre, who was married to Cambodian diplomat Ouk Keth, to testify.

At the invitation of the Khmer Rouge government, Ouk Keth returned to Phnom Penh in 1977 to help rebuild the nation, but was immediately arrested, tortured for six months and then killed at the infamous Tuol Sleng, otherwise known as S-21, prison that Duch (pronounced Doik) ran.

Duch is the first senior Khmer Rouge cadre to be tried in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, or the Khmer Rouge tribunal, which is backed by the United Nations (UN). He faces a life sentence on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes, as well as homicide and torture.

Her husband's fate unknown to her, Lefevre told the court how she searched for several years for news of her missing husband. In 1980 a family friend in a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border told her he had seen Ouk Keth's name on a list of people murdered at S-21, a former high school that the Khmer Rouge converted into a prison in 1975. Ouk Keth was one of more than 15,000 thought to have been tortured and executed in the Tuol Sleng (which means 'Hill of the Poisonous Tree') facility under Duch's command.

Lefevre returned to France and her two young children.

"I had to tell my children that they must grow up without their daddy," she said breaking down. "My son, who was seven, and my daughter, who was four and a half, asked me every day: 'Have you seen Daddy? Will we see Daddy again?' I had to tell them, no, they will never see their daddy again."

Much of the testimony from the tribunal is harrowing, and the experiences of many Cambodians explain why many do not talk about what happened under the Khmer Rouge regime that ruled the country between 1975 and 1979. Around two million people are thought to have died under one of the most brutal regimes in recent history.

But telling Cambodians about those terrible years is a key part of the remit of the joint U.N.-Cambodian tribunal, said Reach Sambath, the head of the tribunal's public affairs office.

That is a challenge here, where around 85 percent of people live in rural areas, and illiteracy is widespread.

For that reason, the court endorses a number of methods of informing the public, Reach Sambath said. One method that his office runs, for example, is to bus in people from across the country to watch proceedings in the 500-seat auditorium. By mid-August more than 17,000 Cambodians from across the country had attended the trial, he said.

The public affairs office, which operates with limited resources, also produces material that is distributed online and by hand at the court itself. But measured in sheer numbers, the most successful way of letting Cambodians know about the proceedings and workings of the tribunal is through the use of television and radio.

The tribunal's daily proceedings are broadcast live on national television every day. But many people do not have the time to spend four days a week following events, which is where a surprisingly successful television show has come in.

The weekly half-hour TV show, which is mainly funded by the British Embassy, is entirely independent of the tribunal's public affairs office. It is broadcast by national broadcaster Cambodia Television Network in its prime lunchtime slot on Mondays and repeated the following day.

The show's producer, Matthew Robinson of independent production company Khmer Mekong Films, said between two and three million people watch it each week – a sizeable proportion of the South-east Asian country's 15 million population.

The format is straightforward enough. Robinson, an experienced British producer and director who lives in Phnom Penh, says that two presenters and a guest examine the events of the previous week.

Co-presenter Neth Pheaktra said the purpose of the show is to provide a concise summary of Duch's trial, which began on February 17.

"During the 24 minutes of the programme we have the summary, the diary of the Duch trial, and the key points that the witness, the defendant and the judges reveal in the court," Neth Pheaktra said.

According to Robinson a key challenge when devising the format was to create a show that was relatively simple to make but that would appeal to the target audience of mainly rural and often poorly educated Cambodians.

"Then (we mould) them all together in a fairly fast-moving way in language that our audience could understand and be interested in," he explained, "so that over a short period, you have seen the most important things in the proceedings that week."

Ung Chan Sophea, the other presenter, said the show's writers ensure that the scripted wording is as simple as possible, even when trying to convey the complicated legal jargon that characterises legal proceedings.

That is something the live feed, understandably, cannot do.

At a small coffee shop in Phnom Penh, Mao Sophea said he loves the analysis the show provides of the week's proceedings.

"For me this is a good show, and the presenters are excellent too," he said. "But to tell you the truth, I haven't heard too many people talking about it – most of the people I know prefer to watch the all-day broadcasts."

And not everyone is a convert. Lah Yum, seated at another table, hardly watches it "because I am normally asleep during lunchtime when this show is broadcast."

But some of Lah Yum's friends do watch it, and as the trial of Duch heads towards its conclusion, they are interested in more than just the proceedings. They want to see what the process and the verdict will mean to those who lost loved ones under the Khmer Rouge regime:

"What they are waiting to see is how the trial will manage to deliver justice for the families of the victims," he said.