



KRouge trial can heal wounds

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Cambodia's first war crimes trial has unearthed painful ghosts from the brutal Khmer Rouge era, but as testimony ends in the case there is growing hope that it will put past traumas to rest.

Moeurn Sarath, whose father and husband were among the two million people who died under the 1975-1979 communist regime, said it was too painful for her to watch the trial of Duch, the movement's main jailer.

Yet while she said that the proceedings made 'all those feelings come back to me again,' she believes that the UN-backed tribunal is good for victims and their families. 'It is good to try those leaders because they have killed a lot of people,' she said. 'I pray that those people who died are at rest because now justice is being found for them.'

The six-month evidence phase of the trial at the UN-backed court ended on Thursday, with the prosecution and defence due to present their final arguments to the judges on November 23. A verdict is not expected until early 2010.

The trial has heard Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, repeatedly accept responsibility and beg forgiveness for his role overseeing the torture and killing of over 15,000 as chief of Tuol Sleng prison. Proceedings have been shown on a weekly television show in Cambodia and the court said that an average of around 300 people a day came to the tribunal to watch from behind bullet-proof glass.

Few Cambodians told AFP they regularly watched proceedings, but all held some hope it would heal the mental wounds in a country that remains strewn with mass graves and bone-filled memorials.

'Every day I have to work and spend less time with the news on TV or newspaper,' said motorcycle taxi driver Sok Rorn, 45, whose mother was killed under the Khmer Rouge.

'But of course, I am aware of the trial. For certain, those people responsible for the death of my parent and many other Cambodians must be held accountable,' he added, with tears in his eyes.

Led by Pol Pot, who died in 1998, the Khmer Rouge emptied Cambodia's cities in a bid to forge a communist utopia.

This year the Cambodian government has agreed for the first time to include a text on the Khmer Rouge in its high school curriculum, a key move in a country where more than 70 percent of the population was born after 1979.

'I have heard and learnt very little about the regime and all those stories. Maybe because I've not experienced it, I am not interested to find out more about it,' said Dav Sam Ath, an 18-year-old high school student. 'I'm sure the trial will help heal (victims') pain because if nobody can give them the answers of the past, how can they go on?'