

Cambodians mourn anniversary of Khmer Rouge victory

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Urgyan Mueller (24) from the USA sobs in front of the victims monument at the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre, near Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Monday 17 April 2006. Cambodians marked the 31st anniversary of the Khmer Rouge victory which plunged the nation into one of the worst genocides of the last century Monday amidst renewed calls for a long-awaited trial of the regime's former leaders to be held swiftly. EPA/MAK REMISSA Phnom Penh - Cambodians marked the 31st anniversary of the Khmer Rouge victory which plunged the nation into one of the worst genocides of the last century Monday amidst renewed calls for a long-awaited trial of the regime's former leaders to be held swiftly.

More than 200 people traveled to the Choeung Ek killing fields on the outskirts of the capital for a memorial service hosted by the opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) and led in prayer by 50 Buddhist monks.

Men Yean, 53, was one of the mourners who attended the Choeung Ek ceremony. She wept as she recounted how six of her family had died under the Khmer Rouge's Democratic Kampuchea reign between 1975 and 1979, including one brother whose body was dumped in a mass grave at these very killing fields.

'I can never forget. I lost six of my family. I want to call on the United Nations to hold a trial for the people who killed them soon, before it is too late,' she said.

The Khmer Rouge is held responsible for the deaths of up to two million Cambodians through disease, starvation, torture, overwork and executions during its brief but bloody rule.

The ultra-Maoist movement took Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, and immediately emptied the city, driving residents out into the fields as the first step of a drive to return the country to 'Year Zero' - a classless agrarian utopia where money and markets were abolished and religion was outlawed.

Even the name Choeung Ek is a grisly reminder of the grim intentions of the Khmer Rouge. The name translates as 'champions', and a Buddhist stupa piled high with skulls is surrounded by mass graves filled mainly with the bodies of prisoners from the equally infamous S-21, or Toul Sleng detention and torture center - Pol Pot's secret jail.

Efforts to get a proposed joint UN-Cambodian government trial of former leaders underway continue to grind forward, but survivors and observers have warned that justice must be found soon or not at all if the mainly aging and ailing former leaders are ever to face the court.

Most prime candidates for trial still live freely in their communities. Others are already dead. The movement's supreme leader, Pol Pot, died without ever facing trial on April 15, 1998.

Opposition leader Sam Rainsy took the opportunity to urge authorities to hasten trial proceedings, saying that it was ironic that the nation's current phase of relative peace and political stability seemed to have dampened the fervour of some to hold a trial swiftly.

'I hope that the trial will start soon. I hope justice will be brought soon,' Rainsy told reporters after the ceremony.

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