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Cambodians Praise Jolie Museum Visit

Phnom Penh — Khmer Rouge survivors said Friday that movie star Angelina Jolie's brief visit to a genocide museum had set a timely example and honoured the memory of victims as a trial of former Khmer Rouge leaders draws closer.

Although the Oscar-winning actress, along with partner Brad Pitt and her adopted Cambodian son Maddox, spent only a short time at the harrowing S-21 Genocide Museum, it served as a tribute to Cambodia's Khmer Rouge victims which would not soon be forgotten, Documentation Center of Cambodia director Youk Chhang said.

"She wanted to see S-21 to better understand the Cambodian heart, and it seems she does," Chhang said. The center has been instrumental in collecting evidence of Khmer Rouge atrocities, which is expected to form a basis for prosecutions in the upcoming trial.

Chhang, who saw his sister murdered by Khmer Rouge soldiers and is himself a survivor of the brutal regime, said Jolie was subdued and obviously moved as she viewed photos of the victims who were tortured at Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot's secret prison.

Only a handful of people survived S-21, also known as Toul Sleng. Thousands died within the prison's walls of starvation and torture, and many of those who survived were taken for execution at the Choueng Ek killing fields outside the capital.

The prison's former director, Duch, is the only Khmer Rouge leader currently in custody awaiting trial.

S-21 director Chey Sopheara, once a student at the former high school before it was converted by the Khmer Rouge, said Jolie had set an example and had earned a legion of new fans by visiting the site as a simple person and quietly meditating on the horrors that had taken place there.

"She wants to understand Khmer history, our Khmer story and the genocide, and she also wanted to show her child more about his own country - even the sadness of 1975 to 1979," he said.

Up to 2 million Cambodians are believed to have died during the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge regime. Indictments for a handful of surviving former leaders of the movement are expected to be issued imminently by a 56.3 million dollar joint UN-Cambodian government sponsored trial, the prosecution phase of which is already underway. Chhang has maintained that a Khmer Rouge trial for charges of genocide and crimes against humanity is necessary not only for Cambodia but for the world to help understand and therefore prevent similar tragedies in the future.

In a country where even iconic names such as Elvis Presley often draw blank stares from locals, Jolie's charity work and her stated love of the country, along with her celebrity, has made her a heroine to thousands of ordinary Cambodians.

Jolie visited Cambodia Wednesday and also met with leaders in the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Pailin as she embarks on a new forest-conservation project in the area which promises to provide up to 1.3 million dollars over the next five years.

She said she fell in love with Cambodia whilst filming the 2002 Tomb Raider movie and adopted her son soon after.

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