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Grievances Air at Khmer Rouge Tribunal Forum

By James Welsh and Yun Samean

KRATIE TOWN — Again and again in hurried and sometimes passionate voices, villagers stood up to ask the Khmer Rouge tribunal's co-prosecutors a succession of basic questions that had no simple answers.

Why did Khmers kill Khmers? Why did people support them? Did their leaders learn to kill while in France? Why didn't the UN help Cambodia during the regime? Why is the trial being held? Why don't we just forget about what happened and move on?

Khmer Rouge tribunal co-prosecutors Robert Petit and Chea Leang did their best to answer the questions of more than 100 villagers from Kratie, Mondolkiri, Ratanakkiri and Stung Treng provinces.

By the time Petit and Chea Leang had finished and a short documentary about the Khmer Rouge had been shown at the hotel where the Center for Social Development forum was held Thursday, villagers said many questions remained unanswered.

They added that prior to the public forum, they had known very little about how the tribunal would operate or, apparently, about the Khmer Rouge regime.

"I don't know anything about the Khmer Rouge ... this is the first time I saw a film like that," said Kratie villager Pen Met, 68.

"I didn't know that they killed people. I just knew that they worked hard to grow potatoes."

Phoek Thy, 30, a member of the ethnic Phnong minority from Mondolkiri province, said he was surprised that no one had actually stood trial at the forum.

"I thought there would be a tribunal today," he said.

Kratie villager Sin Sun, 68, a former Khmer Rouge fighter, said prior to the fall of Phnom Penh in April 1975, he had thought he was fighting for then-Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

Sin Sun asked the co-prosecutors if they could explain to him the political indoctrination he received when he was fighting with the Khmer Rouge.

"Why did they train me to sing [political songs]? Please explain their policies," he said, adding that he also wanted to know why six members of his family were killed.

Petit and Chea Leang emphasized that surviving Khmer Rouge leaders, not low-level officials or countries such as China or the US, will be subject to the tribunal law.

Petit also attempted to address why the Khmer Rouge were so brutal.

"For whatever ideological reasons they believe in, they kill huge numbers of people to get and remain in power," he said. "In Cambodia this is not as clear as in other places. The system they set up and the policies they followed made it impossible for most people to know why they were being killed."

Asked why the UN did not intervene between 1975 and 1979, Petit responded: "That question is best answered by those in power at the time."

Several villagers said they wanted the tribunal to target local officials who had killed their neighbors. Others said they wanted the death penalty for those convicted, and that they also hoped the tribunal would investigate high-profile political killings that have occurred in more recent years.

"The trial would not be done as severely as I want," said retired teacher Tim Ninn, 60, an advocate of the death penalty for the Khmer Rouge leaders.

Tribunal spokesman Reach Sambath said a death sentence would be unconstitutional.

Reach Sambath also said the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia will finance television publicity spots about the tribunal which are expected to air before the end of the year.

But he added that in remote areas where people cannot access television and radio, direct outreach programs are necessary.

Chea Leang told villagers that the possibility of compensation being paid to victims is being discussed. But she added that even if Khmer Rouge suspects have accumulated extensive wealth since their regime was toppled, only the wealth they gained from 1975-1979 period could be confiscated by the court if they are found guilty.

Dr Sotheara Chhim, a psychiatrist with the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization who attended the forum, said the apparent lack of understanding by villagers about the regime could be psychologically motivated.

"There is a conspiracy of avoidance both at the national and individual level in Cambodia," he said.

"Parents never talk about it so there is little healing and a lot of ignorance about the past" Suppressing memories of the past will come at a price, he warned.

"You cannot keep avoiding what happened. Part of it will resurface," he said.

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