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Cambodia Needs Closure: Khmer Rouge still should face justice

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Lightning killed Tea Sarim in May. But that's not the tragedy. The tragedy is that the former Khmer Rouge leader was at liberty to die in that manner. He should have been in prison - safe from nature's wrath, but answering to justice's.

It wasn't surprising that Tea Sarim was free. Most of the surviving Khmer Rouge leaders are, because, 25 years after neighboring Vietnam invaded and removed them from power, no Cambodian government has had the courage to try them for the genocide of 1975 to 1979. During those years, the Communist fanatics slaughtered as many as 2 million Cambodians, turning that Southeast Asian land into the "killing fields" memorialized in the Hollywood film of that name.

That must change. Cambodia needs closure. And that can happen because the Southeast Asian country has a new government after a year of political stalemate. Parliament should immediately implement last year's agreement with the United Nations on a war crimes tribunal. The United States and other governments are willing to pay most of the multimillion-dollar cost, and most of the judges would be Cambodian.

Prime Minister Hun Sen may dislike a tribunal, since he has his own Khmer Rouge past to worry about, but the world has a legal and moral duty to insist.

Pol Pot, the Marxist mass murderer who directed the Khmer Rouge movement, got away; he died in his bed in 1998, convalescing in his jungle hideout. But many of his ruthless gang are still around (thanks in part to Washington's support in exile, a nasty bit of Cold War gamesmanship). The Khmer Rouge were among the 20th century's most eager and productive butchers. The Cambodian government and world community must hold them accountable.