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Cambodian Prime Minister Puts His Weight Behind Khmer Rouge Trial

PHNOM PENH — Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen appeared Friday to publicly put his full and unequivocal support behind a trial of former Khmer Rouge leaders, saying the crimes perpetrated under the regime could not go unpunished.

Speaking at a rally in the eastern district of Memut in Kampong Cham province, the first territory to be liberated from the Khmer Rouge's grasp by Vietnamese-backed forces in late 1978, Hun Sen said former Khmer Rouge leaders being brought to justice was a lesson that must be taught to ensure future governments understood the price of despotism.

"The crimes against humanity of the Khmer Rouge genocidal clique must not be tolerated," he said in a speech broadcast on national radio.

"We should bring them to trial to give justice to the victims, and this should serve as a warning to all people in power that they must not create this kind of brutality," Hun Sen said.

Friday's address lacked the apparent ambivalence of a speech the prime minister made late last month when he said that as far as he was concerned, "the story had ended" when former senior Khmer Rouge leaders, including former head of state Khieu Samphan and Pol Pot's former deputy Nuon Chea, had dined at his home in December 1998.

That date marked the formal surrender of the Khmer Rouge and began a period referred to by the government as national reconciliation. The term "story" is also a Cambodian euphemism for its 30-year civil war.

Critics have consistently questioned the government's political will to go through with the joint UN-Cambodian trials of a handful of the remaining ageing and mainly ailing former leaders and some have even gone as far as to accuse the government of meddling in the process.

They pointed out that many of the current members of the government were themselves former Khmer Rouge cadres of varying rank before they defected and fled to Vietnam to form the nucleus of the group that would return to overthrow it.

Although the prosecution stage of the proceedings, scheduled to take three years, began in mid-July, the process has again stalled amid bitter wrangling over the internal rules necessary to proceed.

The site where Hun Sen chose to make Friday's speech, combined with the imminent celebration of Sunday's anniversary of the 1979 ousting of the Khmer Rouge from power, is likely to reassure some, at least, that the government does have the political will to hold the trials although exactly who will be prosecuted remained unclear.

Up to 2 million Cambodians died of starvation, torture, disease, overwork and execution during the 1975-1979 rule of the ultra-Maoists in one of the worst genocides of the past century.

Advocates of a trial have warned that it must proceed with haste or risk never going ahead at all. Former leader Pol Pot died in 1998. Former military commander Ta Mok also died in hospital last year without ever facing court, and most other former leaders are in their 70s and 80s and complaining of failing health.

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