

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA VOICES OF GENOCIDE: JUSTICE AND THE KHMER ROUGE FAMINE

DC-Cam Community Radio Program (Episode #10):
Famine in Democratic Kampuchea and Case 002 at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal
(formally known as Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia: ECCC)

Topic: Hunger, Memory and Justice

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Voice: Dy Khamboly and Kan Penhsamng
In collaboration with VOA Record Studio in Phnom Penh, December 2013

This is the 10th and final episode of a ten-episode radio series which explores the historical and legal aspects of the famine that took place in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge from 1975-1979. The goal of this program is to better inform Cambodian people about a critical part of their shared history while encouraging active participation in the transitional justice process. The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) welcomes feedback about the program, including contact from people who would like to share their own experience of the famine under the Khmer Rouge or people who have questions for the Center about the Khmer Rouge famine or international law.

This episode serves as a summary of the issues explored thus far in episodes one to nine, offers some concluding thoughts on justice and the Khmer Rouge famine and suggests how the legacy of this tragedy will continue to affect Cambodian society and politics moving forward into the future.

Famine and Justice in Cambodia: What Have we Learned?

As this radio program nears completion, so too does the historic first trial in Case 002 at the ECCC. The Court's Trial Chamber recently heard closing arguments in that case against the two remaining accused: Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan. While the first trial in Case 002 focused on alleged crimes related to the evacuation of Phnom Penh and other events early in the Khmer Rouge period, at various times during this trial issues related to famine and starvation, such as food allocation, the exportation of rice and general agricultural and food distribution policies were discussed during the testimony of key witnesses. Nevertheless, due to the limited scope of the first Case 002 trial, the Trial Chamber will not cover the issues of famine and starvation directly in its ultimate judgment, which is expected to be release in mid-2014. Instead, issues

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of general living conditions throughout the countryside, including starvation and overwork, will only be fully explored at the ECCC should the Court proceed with additional trials in Case 002. As noted by current ECCC International Co-Prosecutor William Smith, completion of the first Case 002 trial is “just the beginning. The regime got worse and worse. The next trial should get off the ground far more quickly. It’s extremely important these charges are heard. Only one third of the story has been told.” Thus, despite the achievement of reaching the end of the first Case 002 trial, it remains unclear whether the Court, and its defendants, will survive to see the completion of further trials.

Nonetheless, the very experience of hearing evidence in open court has helped both Cambodians and the international community to better understand daily life under the Khmer Rouge and how and why the Khmer Rouge leaders led the nation they claimed to be rescuing from corruption and foreign interference down the path to mass suffering and death.

Evidence from the trial, along with other research on the Khmer Rouge period and surviving documents and oral histories, strongly suggest that the Khmer Rouge leaders wanted to turn Cambodia in a model socialist country at an impossibly fast speed. These leaders also pursued an unrealistically pure form of socialism, in the process banning even the most minor aspects of individuality and property ownership, such as personal gardens, the act of cooking and private family meals, as vestiges of privatism. These leaders appear to have been motivated by a desire to revolutionize Cambodia more purely and rapidly than the two revolutions they measured themselves against: those in China and Vietnam. Moreover, apparently offended by what they perceived to be the attempted domination of local socialist revolutionary movements in Southeast Asia by the Vietnamese-dominated Indochinese Communist Party and the imperialist intentions of the West, the Khmer Rouge leadership decided to close Cambodia’s border and practice extreme self-reliance.

The results of this rapid drive for a pure and jealously independent socialist overhaul of Cambodian society was the near-absolute destruction of Cambodian society and the decimation of its civilian population through executions and horrific living conditions, including mass famine and starvation. While it is unlikely that criminal accountability will ever be achieved specifically for the famine enforced on the civilian population by the Khmer Rouge from 1975-1979, this fact does not mean that history should forget this tragedy or label it merely as a non-criminal catastrophe, comparable to an earthquake or flood that causes mass suffering and death. Instead, this program has argued that the Khmer Rouge famine should be remembered and discussed in criminal terms, specifically using the language of crimes against humanity.

The Legacy of the Khmer Rouge Famine

It has been nearly 35 years since the end of the Khmer Rouge's reign in power in Cambodia. Despite over a quarter-century having passed since this dark period of Cambodian history, the repercussions of the destruction wrought by the Khmer Rouge, including through enforcing famine conditions, continue to deeply affect Cambodian society and politics to this day. For survivors of the Khmer Rouge period, suffering through such an extreme and long famine continues to deeply affect both their physical and mental health. Birth-rates also fell due to famine during the Khmer Rouge period, meaning that many families not only lost living members to the ravages of famine, but would have also added new members between 1975 and 1979, who would now be adults. Finally, the few children who were born during the Khmer Rouge period to starving mothers have faced lifelong increased health risks due to the physical traumas their mothers experienced during pregnancy, as medical studies have linked various health problems to children born to starving mothers.

In addition to these direct consequences on individual survivors and their families, the collective experience of the Khmer Rouge period famine has surely had a profound effect on Cambodian society and politics. When the Khmer Rouge period ended, a deeply traumatized nation plagued by continuing conflict struggled to pull itself back together. For decades, the threat of violence and memories of starvation helped to shape the focus of many Cambodians on everyday survival and make them understandably skeptical of political change, protests or anything else that might cause further unrest. When survivors of the Khmer Rouge period considered the pros and cons of protesting or making demands for better governance, they did so with vivid memories of the famine and terror that resulted the last time a group claiming to be the cure for corruption and inequality swept into power through revolution. A heavy emphasis was placed on stability and peace, sometimes at the expense of the development of better democratic institutions, responsible development and the protection of human rights.

As time has passed however, and some efforts have been made towards transitional justice, reconciliation and accountability for the crimes of the Khmer Rouge period at the ECCC and through other efforts, the national wound that was the legacy of the Khmer Rouge for decades, appears to have begun to heal. There are law students in Cambodia keenly interested in issues of human rights, the rule of law and judicial independence. The health of Cambodia's democracy has re-emerged as a subject of ongoing national discussion and debate. Cambodians who feel their human rights have been violated or that they have not been fully afforded their democratic rights have begun to publicly voice their dissatisfaction through non-violent protests and useful public dialogue. While in past decades, Cambodia was a nation traumatized into thinking only about day-to-day survival by a collective memory of hunger, deprivation and violence, there appears to be a growing will to dare to hope for more than mere survival and the absence of constant war and violence. Although still

young and fragile, this growing demand for better governance and fairer development is a positive sign that Cambodia can, given time and continued effort, continue to heal the wounds of the Khmer Rouge period.

Listener Questions
Answers by Randle DeFalco

1. Why did the Khmer Rouge starve their people when they had produced a lot of crops? Where had those crops been transported to?
 - First, the Khmer Rouge planned to produce incredibly large crops of rice while in power, but these plans to produce three tons of rice per hectare were never successful while the Khmer Rouge were in power, so rice crops were not nearly as large as planned. That being said, there is evidence suggesting that, while not massive, a significant rice crop was harvested each year during the Khmer Rouge period. Second, the Khmer Rouge's economic plan was to independently transform Cambodia into a modern industrial country by selling rice on the international market to gain income to fund the regime's goals. Thus, there was a large amount of pressure on local leaders to provide the Khmer Rouge central leadership with a lot of rice to support both the Khmer Rouge military and to sell to other countries in exchange for money and goods that could not be produced in Cambodia. Available evidence suggests that China was the recipient of most of the rice shipped out of Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period.
2. Why did the Khmer Rouge put their people to hard work?
 - The Khmer Rouge stated that the regime's official policy was one of "independence self-mastery" which meant that no foreign aid or assistance would be accepted. The regime also had plans for Cambodia to take a "super great leap forward" towards becoming a modern socialist country and wanted to achieve revolutionary goals at a faster rate than previous socialist revolutions, especially those in China and Vietnam. As a result, the Khmer Rouge leadership sought to rely on human labour alone to achieve massive agricultural and infrastructure projects, resulting in hard labour and extreme hours of work.
3. Why did the Khmer Rouge kill their people?
 - This is a difficult and complex question that has been considered by many scholars. The answer is that there were many factors that combined to create a situation where people were killed in very large numbers through both executions and living conditions, including famine. Generally, the Khmer Rouge leaders wanted to rapidly achieve a pure socialist revolution and believed that there were enemy agents, both foreign and within Cambodia, who were working to undermine the regime's revolutionary plans. As a result,

over time the leaders became more and more paranoid. Eventually, the leaders blamed all of their failed plans, for example the plan to achieve three tons of rice per hectare, on acts of sabotage by hidden "internal enemies." Thus, whenever an area of the country failed to live up to the expectations of the Khmer Rouge leaders, this area would likely be violently purged. In this way violence and living conditions both spiraled out of control and resulted in so much killing.

4. Why did the Khmer Rouge separate people from their family members?

- The Khmer Rouge leaders knew that family ties are very strong in Cambodia and thought that people should be loyal to the revolution more than to their family members. These leaders saw family social structures as competing with their plan to turn Cambodia into a pure socialist state and therefore did not worry about separating people from their families. Another reason for these separations was the fact that the Khmer Rouge assigned people to be sent to wherever the revolution needed more human labour and no thought was given to keeping families together when assigning people to areas of the country.

5. Why didn't people rebel against the Khmer Rouge?

- It is impossible to know why people did not rebel against the Khmer Rouge, but there are likely several reasons why they did not. First, the Khmer Rouge came into power quickly and immediately spread people throughout the countryside, making it difficult for people to form groups to oppose the powerful Khmer Rouge military. Second, even on the local level, people were constantly watched by Khmer Rouge cadres and if they were caught saying anything bad about the revolution, they could be put in prison, beaten or even executed. This made it even harder for people to organize any rebellion. Third, people were overworked to the point of near death during the Khmer Rouge period. Because people were so weakened from overwork and lack of food, it is likely that they were simply too exhausted and weak to fight back, but focused all of their energy on simply surviving each day. Fourth, there were armed Khmer Rouge cadres throughout the countryside and local people did not have the weapons to effectively fight cadres who had guns and other weapons. In one village, a group of Cham Muslims did rebel against the Khmer Rouge after some of their local leaders were executed and they were banned from praying or otherwise practicing their religion. However, this rebellion was doomed to failure because the rebels mostly only had swords, while the Khmer Rouge had guns and other weapons. After the rebellion, almost everyone who had fought back was put in prison, tortured and executed.

6. Has the Khmer Rouge Tribunal brought justice to the Khmer Rouge victims?
- As of now the Khmer Rouge Tribunal has entered one verdict against Kaing Guek Eav alias Duch and is in the process of the trial of Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, former Khmer Rouge leaders. The meaning of justice is a very personal thing however, and it is up to each survivor of the Khmer Rouge period and indeed, every Cambodian citizen, to decide for themselves whether they are satisfied with the work of the Tribunal.

Questions received from:

- Ouch Sokseray Monika, Preah Vihear Province
- Pheaktra, Preah Vihear Province
- Sophea, Preah Vihear Province

This concludes the tenth and final episode of the Documentation Center radio series on famine under the Khmer Rouge.

If you have any comment or question, please send your letter to Mr. Men Pechet, an organizer of DC-Cam's radio program, at house number 66, Preah Sihanouk Blvd, Phnom Penh, or send to P.O Box 1110, Phnom Penh, or call to 023-211-875 or fax to 023-210-358. Email: truthmpechet@dccam.org. Thank you.

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