

# The Phnom Penh Post

**Confronting the past**  
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## *Why should the Cambodian people support the Khmer Rouge tribunal?*

The Khmer Rouge tribunal remains the subject of intense debate, among both Cambodians and foreigners, over such matters as relations between the Cambodian and international judges, corruption, independence of the tribunal, and whether there should be further prosecutions of other former Khmer Rouge cadre.

Today I would like to look at the larger picture and focus on the reasons why we, the Cambodian people, as a nation should support the process of justice in general and especially the Khmer Rouge tribunal.

Some people, even prominent leaders in Cambodia and abroad, advocate that it would be better to bury the past. They also pretend that the Cambodian people in general, who are now more and more disconnected from nightmares of the Pol Pot times, are not interested in the tribunal and would like to go forward, instead of looking back to this frightening period.

They may be right from a short-term perspective. This trial raises issues which dig deep into the structure of our political power, into our culture of internal fighting and violence and into who is ultimately responsible for the massive killings experienced by our population. It digs deep into the historical, political and perhaps psychological reasons for this aberrant and inhuman episode of our history. It digs deep into our national conscience and prompts difficult questions. It is indeed a painful process, which could awaken resentment and hatred.

However, I believe that, from a long-term perspective, it is wrong to close our eyes, plug up our ears and shut our mouths. Cambodia is not the only country having experienced mass murder. After the Second World War, Germany and Japan had to face their history in order to turn the page and go forward. Indeed, nightmares cannot be buried; the souls of the victims cannot be silenced. The anger and resentment of the survivors will not fade away easily. Even when all those connected to this dark period have disappeared, the tragic burden of shame and horror will still hang over our national conscience and collective memory.

Our Cambodian people know that.

In the recent past there has been some evidence of their quest for justice. That includes a rally of 5,000 people during the visit of a UN delegation to Phnom Penh in August 1999. A number of surveys have been conducted after the UNTAC operation: surveys by the Khmer Journalists' Association in 1996 and by the Institute of Statistics and Research on Cambodia in 1999. Both of these surveys reported that over 80 percent of Cambodians wanted the surviving Khmer Rouge leaders to be prosecuted. In 1999, the Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee presented the UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan, with a petition signed by nearly 85,000 Cambodians that called on the UN to establish an international tribunal.

Being able to confront our past is a matter of dignity and refers to the sense of responsibility of our generation. If we do not seek truth and justice, we will be regarded as a failed generation, unable to deal with our own contradictions and unable to overcome the huge trauma inflicted by some of our compatriots on our people. This inability to confront our past - which can be seen in various forms, for example in the way our school books fail to describe the Khmer Rouge period in an objective and comprehensive manner - will provoke disdain from our future generations and from the international community.

Some people argue that Cambodians should not be alone to bear this burden, since some neighbouring countries and great powers have been more or less involved in the catastrophic Khmer Rouge period. This is true. Some countries may, in another historical and ideological context, have used Cambodia for broader strategic purposes and strongly supporting the Khmer Rouge from behind the scenes.

But we cannot force them to confront their own past and their conscience. What we can do is set an example for them and for future Cambodian generations. This example will be in accordance with our desire for dignity and peace of mind, and our everlasting quest for international respect.

There are two different ways to do that.

One is the South African way through truth and forgiveness in order to achieve national reconciliation. It could have been attempted in Cambodia with the involvement and the support of Buddhism and other religions, provided there was a true and sustainable commitment for the sake of truth and genuine reconciliation. Unfortunately, the time was not ripe for this kind of process in Cambodia. We were not ready to follow the example of South Africa, a country which went from being regarded as a place of cruelty and injustice - under apartheid - to being today a model of reconciliation and generosity for the world.

The other way is a criminal tribunal, to seek fair and independent justice for the sake of the millions of souls who have suffered. In this way, some peace of the mind may be offered to the relatives of the victims and the survivors, and some dignity restored to our people and the Cambodian nation as a whole. In this regard, the Khmer Rouge tribunal in

process - which can also set an example for fair and independent justice in Cambodia - may be our last chance to really confront our past and overcome the nightmares in order to look into our future with a new frame of mind and renewed hope. Only if we do that, can we get rid of the burden of the past, accommodate our national contradictions, respect ourselves and get respect from others.

That is the reason why I deeply hope the Cambodian government and the international community will be wise and generous enough to cooperate with each other in order to clear the tribunal from the current suspicions of corruption and political interference, which discredit the whole process.