



GENOCIDE WATCH

THE INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END GENOCIDE

The Truth About the Khmer Rouge is Too Big for One Court Case

Not until all Khmer Rouge leaders come forward to give frank testimony can Cambodia really bury its past

By Thet Sambath, The Guardian

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The Khmer Rouge former second in command Nuon Chea at his home on the Thai-Cambodian border in 2005. Photograph: David Longstreath/AP

It was nearly dark when I got to his small wooden house on the Thai-Cambodian border. He greeted me with a weary smile. We both knew it would be the last time we would sit and eat a meal together.

For the next morning the police would come with a helicopter to arrest Nuon Chea, the most senior surviving Khmer Rouge leader, wanted by a UN-backed tribunal for his alleged role in the deaths of 1.7 million people. The dead include both my parents and brother.

That was nearly four years ago. On Monday Nuon Chea's trial begins. I won't be going along on Monday morning but I have been told I may be called as a witness later. That is because I am the only person that Nuon Chea has trusted so far with the innermost secrets of the Khmer Rouge regime he ran together with Pol Pot. I put a small fraction of the thousand or so hours of interviews he gave me between 2001 and 2007 into my documentary film *Enemies of the People*.

I have mixed feelings about the court. If it helps to bring us to the truth it will have been worth it. But the truth of the Killing Fields may be too big for just one court case, even if it is, as the British co-prosecutor claims, "the largest and most complicated prosecution since Nuremberg in 1945".

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After my film won a prize at the Sundance film festival, the judges pressed me and my British co-director Rob Lemkin to deposit the film as part of the prosecution evidence in the case against Nuon Chea. We refused – Nuon Chea would not have talked so candidly to me had I told him I would hand over the material to a court.

Among the criticism, we were even told we were helping the Khmer Rouge get away with genocide. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In any case, the court order shows they still plan to use the film as evidence now it is in the public domain. But I am glad they did not make it part of the prosecution case dossier as it would mean that no Khmer Rouge would again talk honestly to me or any other researcher or journalist. In fact, many are continuing to talk to me precisely because they believe that my project is neutral and genuinely interested in creating an archive for future generations.

Today's trial is far more important than last year's proceedings against Duch, the S-21 prison chief. Cambodians are desperately waiting to hear from Nuon Chea directly for the first time.

But many Cambodian victims, including me, deeply wish that all the key Khmer Rouge leaders from the 1970s would come to give frank testimony at court. This includes our current prime minister, Hun Sen, the chairman of the national assembly, Heng Samrin, the president of the senate, Chea Sim, and several others.

They all know a lot about why the Khmer Rouge descended into such extreme violence. And it is not until they all tell the whole truth of those years that the souls of our loved ones can truly rest in peace.

Twelve years ago Hun Sen said we should "dig a hole and bury the past". He is right. We all want to bury the past. But only after we have extracted the truth and understood the tragedy as fully as we can. If the whole truth does not come out at court, it will have to come out in some other way. For the truth is our only hope of achieving real reconciliation.

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