



Miles Away and Years on, Cambodians Relish Verdict

SANTA ANA, Calif. — Aug 7, 2014, 4:47 PM ET
By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

Sophany Bay saw her two young daughters and son die at the hands of the infamous Khmer Rouge in Cambodia after the family was forced from their home and she was sent to toil in the fields under the movement's reign of terror.

Nearly four decades later, the mental health counselor who helps Cambodian-Americans cope with the trauma of the 1970s-era killings said she finally felt a sense of justice after a U.N.-backed tribunal convicted two top leaders of crimes against humanity.

"Many, many years, I wait for justice," said Bay, 69, who watched footage of the judgment via YouTube on her cellphone. "Some victims, they pass away already. They don't have time to see justice. For me, I am lucky. I am alive."

Fifty Cambodians in the United States were among the 4,000 civil parties in the proceedings in Cambodia, according to the Center for Justice and Accountability, a San Francisco-based human rights organization.

On Thursday, the tribunal imposed life sentences against Khieu Samphan, an 83-year-old former head of state, and Nuon Chea, the movement's 88-year-old chief ideologue, in the first and possibly last verdicts against the group's aging top members.

Bay, who lives in San Jose, California, testified before the tribunal last year about how her ailing infant daughter died after a Khmer Rouge medic gave her an injection in the head, and how her young son and daughter also died, sick and starving.

Nushin Sarkarati, a staff lawyer at the Center who represents 45 of the U.S.-based civil parties, said her clients were pleased the tribunal ordered reparations, including a day of remembrance for the victims and the development of an educational curriculum about the Khmer Rouge.

But, above all, she said, they relished being able to provide evidence that led to the convictions.

"A judgment is a reparation in and of itself," she said. "It gave them recognition they've been waiting for for over 35 years that these men are responsible for the deaths of their family and their suffering."

More than 300,000 Cambodians live in the United States, more than a third in California, according to U.S. Census data. Many, including Bay, came to the U.S. as refugees after the Khmer Rouge's reign ended in 1979.

Kelvin So, who lives in Milpitas, California, spent three years in a forced labor camp after his family was forced to evacuate the capital, Phnom Penh, in 1975. The 66-year-old said he hopes Samphan and Chea will apologize for their roles in the devastation.

"The judgment tells the Khmer Rouge, and the world, that no matter how much time has passed, the victims will still demand justice," he said.

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