
Local Cambodians give testimony, await Khmer Rouge verdict

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7/25/2014

[AUDIO FROM THIS STORY](#)

Thirty-five years after the Khmer Rouge regime terrorized Cambodia, judgments are coming for two former senior officials charged with war crimes, and Chanthan Pich doesn't want to hear anything but "guilty" verdicts.

"Not guilty, no justice," Pich, 73, said.

Pich, part of Long Beach's Cambodian community, is deeply invested in the Aug. 7 court outcome. She is among thousands of Cambodians who started over in the U.S. after surviving Maoist-style Communist rule that left nearly two million people dead through starvation, disease, torture and execution.

She is also one of nearly 200 survivors in the U.S. who submitted written testimony to assist prosecutors in the U.N.-backed tribunal.

Some fellow survivors found it too painful to dredge up the memories needed to file their statements. There are those too disgusted with a court process that's been plagued by delays and charges of corruption. Still others worry about retribution being visited on relatives in Cambodia if they gave their accounts on the record. Some former Khmer Rouge members are leaders within the current government.

But Pich said she's already lost 17 family members during the regime's rule between 1976 and 1979. She has nothing else to lose.

"They want to me kill me? Kill now," she said. "(I'm not) afraid."

Survivors speak up

Pich and other survivors submitted their testimony after being recruited by sociology professor Leakhena Nou of California State University, Long Beach, and a group of volunteers.

Nou had been pleased to learn that the war tribunal, created in 2006 and called the Extraordinary Chamber in the Courts of Cambodia, had made an unprecedented move of encouraging survivors to provide statements to the prosecution. Some have been called to testify.

But Nou realized several years into the tribunal, only survivors in Cambodia were involved in the trials. Nou said no outreach had been made to overseas Cambodians, and they didn't know they could play a role.

"I felt that it was a moral rights violation," Nou said. "Not only do they have the opportunity to share their stories but it was an important step to the healing process and the search for justice," Nou said.

Nou founded the non-profit [Applied Social Research Institute of Cambodia](#), and set to work collecting statements from Cambodians across the country. She started in Long Beach, which has a community of about 17,000 Cambodians, the largest in the U.S.

Uncovering the past

Pich heard about one of Nou's workshops at the local senior center. When Nou asked who wanted to record their stories, Pich said "Me. I want to complain too. But I don't know how."

Nou guided Pich through the legal language on the statement form, and made sure she was emotionally ready to answer questions, such as those asking about psychological and physical harms.

"Where do you being when you've suffered four years of horrific trauma?" Nou said. "It was really a challenge."

Meanwhile Pich, a former elementary school teacher, plumbed painful memories like her parents dying of starvation and the execution of her brother. In its quest for an agrarian utopia, the Khmer Rouge targeted the educated. Pich's brother was not only an engineer but a captain in the former Lon Nol regime. Pich remembers seeing her brother on a list of those who'd been executed. "After I saw that, I go home and cry and cry and cry at home," Pich said.

Another survivor Roth Prom said she lost 17 family members to starvation and forced labor.

She said she has built-up anger and had no hesitation in giving a statement.

"Other civilized countries, when bad people do bad things they should be prosecuted so why can't we do the same?" Prom said in Khmer.

Prom said she also trusted Nou, whose own relatives were killed by the regime.

"I have complete faith in Leakhena," Prom said. "I want God to help her so she can help others."

A documentary about the group and the survivors called "Wounds We Carry" is currently in the works. Here is the trailer:

Trauma crosses boundaries

Survivors plan to attend a meeting Saturday at the Khmer Arts Academy in Long Beach updating them on the latest in the war tribunal.

Khmer Rouge dictator Pol Pot may have died in 1998. But some of his top associates are still alive and facing prosecution.

Prison chief Kaing Guek Eav is the only one to be convicted so far. Also known as Comrade Duch, he ran the Tuol Sleng prison where an estimated 15,000 Cambodians were tortured and killed.

Currently awaiting verdicts are Pol Pot's second-in-command Nuon Chea and former head of state, Khieu Samphan. (There were originally four defendants, but former foreign minister Ieng Sary died, and his wife Ieng Thirith, who was social affairs minister, was diagnosed with dementia.) The upcoming judgements will address charges of the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh and the mass killing of soldiers and civilians linked to the Lon Nol regime. A second trial of the men to start next year will take up other charges such as forcing marriages and genocide.

The vast majority of statements accepted for these trials came from in-country Cambodians. But overseas Cambodians are also being heard, said attorney Nushin Sarkarati who represents this group as part of her work with the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability.

Not only are their statements being read by the court, but statements have been cited in indictments against individuals on trial, Sarkarati said. One survivor living in San Jose, [Sophany Bay, was called to testify](#) last year in Cambodia.

"I think the benefit of having diaspora representation before the court is the court will know these crimes were not limited to Cambodia, that it's affected the world over," Sarkarati said.

Sarkarati said just like the survivors in Cambodia, Cambodians in the U.S. have had trouble piecing back together their lives.

"We see high poverty rates and low education rates amongst this community and that's not just a correlative," Sarkarati said. "That's a causal factor to the war crimes that this community has endured."

New generation learns from the old

Darren Kong said growing up in a family scarred by the Khmer Rouge, he always felt something was wrong. But he hated asking his mother about it. She had lost three children before making it to the US with her surviving kids.

"In telling me a few sentences and she's breaking into tears," Kong said.

In college, Kong educated himself about what happened and was floored to learn that Khmer Rouge leaders were walking around, free.

"I got to be honest, it built up a rage within me," Kong said. "It set my soul on fire and I wanted answers and I wanted them right away."

Now 26, and a USC graduate student in social work, Kong volunteers his time to work with Nou and Applied Social Research Institute of Cambodia. He said a lot of younger Cambodian-Americans aren't interested in the painful history.

"Some people ask why are you wasting time on this?" Kong said. "But you know what? If we don't save the memory of our elders than we lost everything forever."

<http://www.scpr.org/blogs/multiamerican/2014/07/25/17059/local-cambodians-give-testimony-await-khmer-rouge/?slide=3>