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Khmer Rouge victims in U.S. to get their day in court

By John Boudreau
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Khun Aun, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge regime, holds a photo of her husband Keo.. (All photos by LiPo Ching)

Many Cambodians have lived the lives of ghosts in Silicon Valley, not seen or heard from much, quietly tormented every day and every night with unbearable memories of the genocide that wiped out entire families -- parents, spouses, children, extended relatives.

Now, finally, some of them will have their day in international court. When the second trial of alleged perpetrators of the Khmer Rouge genocide begins in a few months, members of the Cambodian community in the United States will be represented by attorneys at the proceedings.

On Saturday, about 50 members of Silicon Valley's 10,000-strong Cambodian community gathered at the Wat Khemara Rangsey Buddhist temple in East San Jose to hear about the upcoming trial of four senior Khmer Rouge leaders charged in connection with the deaths of 1.7 million people from execution, torture, starvation and disease from 1975 to 1979.

"For our clients, who have waited so long for this, it can be overwhelming to revisit the past," said Andrea Evans, legal director at the Center for Justice and Accountability, a San Francisco human rights legal group that will represent scores of Cambodians living in the U.S. before the United Nations-backed tribunal.

Sophany Bay, a 65-year-old San Jose counselor, is providing written testimony.

"For more than three decades, I waited to see justice," she said in a statement to the international court. "We are getting old. We want to see justice before we die."



The reason, Bay said Saturday, is that the nightmares never stop.

"I lost all my family," said Bay, whose three children died. One of them, a baby girl named Pom, died after a Khmer Rouge soldier injected something into her head.

"I don't have any siblings," she said. "I don't have any nephews. They killed my whole family."

Bay said she hasn't dreamed in the present ever since. All her dreams, she said, are of the past horrors in her homeland.

The once-powerful Khmer Rouge leaders who will stand before the tribunal as early as June are now in their late 70s and mid-80s. The complex trial could last as long as two to three years.

The defendants are Ieng Sary, who was foreign minister; his wife, Ieng Thirith, minister of social welfare; Khieu Samphan, head of state; and Nuon Chea, known as Brother No 2. The top leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998. In the earlier trial, Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch, was sentenced to 19 years in prison for the torture and death of at least 14,000 people in the Tuol Sleng prison in the capital of Phnom Penh.

The regime took control in 1975 after the war in next-door Vietnam spread to Cambodia. Khmer



Rouge leaders believed they could create a utopian communist society by purging the country of intellectuals, business leaders, government officials and anyone else considered a threat to their revolution.

Approximately 157,500 Cambodians resettled in the U.S. from 1975 to 1994, the vast majority as refugees. Many still suffer serious mental health problems as a result of experiencing torture and witnessing killings of their family members.

In 2009, researcher Leakhena Nou, a medical sociologist at Cal State Long Beach, began documenting the stories of genocide survivors in the United States. She discovered that Cambodian-Americans, like their countrymen, could offer testimony and have legal representation at the tribunal proceedings.

During her research, she discovered that many Cambodians in America experienced the same symptoms of young people living in Cambodia.

"I found the same hopelessness, helplessness and lack of trust in themselves, family and government leaders," Nou said.

Nou's research is deeply personal. Her family escaped the reign of terror because her father, a Cambodian military officer who had been living in Thailand with his family when the Khmer Rouge took over, sensed grave danger when he and others were asked to return. Those who answered the call were executed immediately upon their return or taken to prison and tortured to death.

"The instinct my dad had saved our lives," she said.

The process of retelling stories can, at least in the short run, cause substantial emotional trauma for survivors, said Dr. Daryn Reicherter, an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Stanford University School of Medicine who treats many Cambodian emigres in San Jose.

"They had this rough patch," he said. But, Reicherter added, "Not one of them had a regret" about their decision to retell their experiences in excruciating detail.

So far, 30 Cambodians living in the United States, including five from the Bay Area, have been chosen as potential witnesses during the proceedings.



Even those who did not provide testimony showed up at Saturday's forum in hopes of finding some solace with knowledge about the upcoming trial. "I am very hurt. I have suffered," said Khun Aun, a 70-year-old widow, her body bent from old age, her arms wrapped around a portrait of her husband.

She wept as she recalled the last time she saw him. The Khmer Rouge led him away with his brothers to be executed. Hands bound, he turned and yelled back at her to take care of their eight children.

But five of their offspring would later die, and Khun was tortured to unconsciousness.

The forum lasted more than four-and-a-half hours. The elderly Cambodians, faces strained with anxiety, listened raptly to the presentation that was told in English and their native tongue. They were told about Nou's research and heard from the legal team. As they watched videos from the trial of Duch, some gasped softly, others wiped away tears.

At one point, a lawyer asked what they wanted from the prosecution of the Khmer Rouge leaders.

One survivor cried out: "I want my family back."