Why the world should not forget Khmer Rouge and the killing fields of Cambodia

By Adam Taylor  August 7, 2014

On Thursday, 83-year-old Khieu Samphan and 88-year-old Nuon Chea were found guilty in a Phnom Penh court. A United Nations-backed tribunal had decided that these two men, elderly and frail as they are now, committed crimes against humanity more than 30 years ago. They were senior members of a regime that created the deaths of almost 2 million people.

With the sentences, the hope is that a horrific chapter in Cambodian history might be over. Finally, after almost a decade of investigation and a $200 million price tag, the Khmer Rouge's top leadership has been brought to justice. However, the severity of the crimes and the problems in bringing the perpetrators to trial mean many Cambodians will never forgive or forget.

The Khmer Rouge's name, and that of its main leader, Pol Pot, have become a short-hand for systematic cruelty and horror on an enormous scale. The reality is almost certainly impossible to imagine for people who were not there. Between 1975 and 1979, 1.7 million Cambodians are believed to have lost their lives. For a such a small country, that created an effect that lasts to this day: Almost one in five people living in Cambodia at the time is believed to have died as a result of Cambodian genocide.

Radicalized during a time of anti-imperialism and Communist ideology, Pol Pot (born Saloth Sar) and many other founders of the Khmer Rouge (officially the Communist Party of Kampuchea) were well-educated students who had lived in France yet felt alienated by post-independence Kingdom of Cambodia. In 1968, they formed the Khmer Rouge as an offshoot from the Vietnam People's Army from North Vietnam. The war in neighboring Vietnam helped shape Cambodian politics, and many historians now believe that a U.S. bombing campaign in their country drove many rural Cambodians into the arms of the radical ideology. On April 17, 1975, two years after the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam, Phnom Penh fell to Khmer Rouge troops and U.S.-supported government forces surrendered.

Just days after the Khmer Rouge took power, they ordered 2 million people living in Phnom Penh and other urban areas to head to the countryside. This was to be "Year Zero" in Cambodia's new rural, classless society, and the country would now be known as the Democratic Kampuchea. The idea was based on an extreme version of Maoism and a belief in the superiority of the Khmer people, the predominant ethnic group in Cambodia. Citizens were to be turned into traditional rural peasants, referred to as the "old people" by the Khmer Rouge. Urban workers and intelligentsia elites were viewed as "new people" and easily
During the Khmer Rouge era. “But what can I do? Even if they die many times over, it would not be enough.” 54-year-old Chea Sophon told the Associated Press. His own brother had died in the Khmer Rouge era. “But what can I do? Even if they die many times over, it would not be enough.”

So while Thursday's verdicts seemed like a victory, many weren't quite sure how to feel about it. “The crimes are huge, and just sentencing them to life in jail is not fair,” 54-year-old Chea Sophon told the Associated Press. His own brother had died in the Khmer Rouge era. “But what can I do? Even if they die many times over, it would not be enough.”
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