

Khmer Rouge story a vague one for young Cambodians

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April 5, 2009

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) — Dum Sum An, street vendor of fried rice and noodles, is too young to have known Cambodia's 1970s reign of terror. For her, the trial of Khmer Rouge high-ups in the courthouse nearby means crowds of spectators who need to be fed.

The 24-year-old woman, like many of her generation, has only a cursory knowledge of the horrors wrought on the country during the group's four-year hold on power. She says she came to Phnom Penh for a job and earns \$60 to \$100 a month from her tin-roofed stall 100 yards from the custom-built courthouse.

"I don't have time to follow the trial," she said.

The U.N.-assisted Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia, which last week began hearing the first genocide case against a former Khmer Rouge official, hopes to find justice for the 1.7 million people who were worked to death, starved or executed by the communist regime, and to set the record straight for survivors and history.

The subject isn't taught in schools, and many survivors find it hard to tell their children about it. When they do, some children don't believe them.

Some children may only hear about the Khmer Rouge when their parents make them finish their food and say something like, "If you lived through the Khmer Rouge, you would know how important is food," said Mychelle Balthazard, a co-researcher of a report published in January by the University of California, Berkeley. "If it's like that, it wouldn't be very interesting to them."

The report found that 81 percent of Cambodians under age 29 said their knowledge of the period was "poor or very poor." Eighty-four percent said what they knew came from families and friends.

Balthazard added that they probably are "more interested in MTV and technology than what happened 30 years ago."

Still, most of those surveyed said they want to learn more. Dum Sum An, for instance, said she wished she had time to be in the courthouse. "I would learn a lot from what Duch says to the judges," she said.

Duch is the nom de guerre of Kaing Guek Eav, who commanded the Tuol Sleng prison in the capital Phnom Penh, where as many as 16,000 men, women and children were

tortured before being sent to be killed. At age 66, he is one of five Khmer Rouge leaders going on trial.

Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia and himself a survivor, said young people do care about the Khmer Rouge. "They want to understand it so they can bury it," he said.

"The story is difficult to transmit to the children: the cheating, the lying, pointing a finger at others to be executed to survive, stealing food to eat," said Youk Chhang, whose group collects evidence of the atrocities. "Most parents don't tell this to their family."

At the prison, which is now a museum, 16-year-old Oeng Kim Heak walked past the blood stains and rows of shackles that chained prisoners to the floor.

She was brought to the prison with a group of students for a history lesson by U.S. Peace Corps volunteers. She stared at photographs of people who were interrogated, tortured and killed.

"My father told me and I didn't believe him. I thought it was a story," she said.

"All these Khmer people died for no reason. I don't want this to happen again."

The Ministry of Education and the Documentation Center have collaborated on publishing new textbooks, and Youk Chhang said the Khmer Rouge legacy will be included in the high school curriculum for the first time this year after 3,000 teachers are trained about it.

The court's outreach office has reached some 750,000 of Cambodia's 14 million people with information about the tribunal.

But Outreach Officer Chin Hemvichet says more people need to be reached outside the capital, and conceded that he wants funds for a traveling show with DVDs of the trial to blanket the country. "So far we don't have a vehicle," he said.

But even in Phnom Penh some were indifferent. "I'm busy and I don't want to know about that," said Leang Nalin, 22, who studies finance. "I know a little but I have never cared. My parents never talk about it," she said.

Restaurant caterer Yao Daung Dee, 42, said she believes Duch is already being punished.

"I am Buddhist. I trust in the law of karma. He killed a lot of people so I think he already has to pay back. I think he can't sleep at night."