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EDITORIAL

The Killing Fields

Three decades have passed since the world first learned of the "killing fields" of Cambodia: whole populations driven from cities, mass executions, and countless deaths by starvation, forced labor and disease at the bloody hands of the Khmer Rouge. Yet it was only this week that a U.N.-Cambodian tribunal was sworn in and began the long task of bringing those most responsible to trial.

The tribunal, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, faces enormous hurdles, not least of which is that the leaders of the Khmer Rouge are either old or dead. Pol Pot died in 1998. Of his top lieutenants, Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary are in bad health. Only two former leaders are in detention, and one of them, Ta Mok, the former military chief of the Khmer Rouge, was hospitalized last Thursday. We can only hope that there will be enough of a trial in the end to give Cambodia's survivors some sense of justice done.

The tribunal has a responsibility not only to those survivors but to a world that has yet to learn how to deal with crimes against humanity. The horrified outcry when the crimes of the Khmer Rouge came to light was only repeated later, over Srebrenica, Rwanda, Sierra Leone. Yet the international tribunals set up for these atrocities have been painfully slow, frightfully expensive and sadly inadequate. Slobodan Milosevic died before judgment could be passed by the Yugoslavia tribunal; Charles Taylor, the former president of Liberia, was only arrested in March to face trial before the Sierra Leone court. And another genocide is under way today, in Darfur, in full view of the entire world.

Given this history, it should not be surprising if victims of atrocities come to see international justice as an expensive exercise in allaying Western guilt for failing to act in time. The Cambodia tribunal, with 17 Cambodian judges and 13 from other countries, is set to spend \$56.3 million over three years in a country where most people live on less than a dollar a day. Yet that expense will be justified if it can bring as many culprits to justice as possible, as quickly as possible; if it can help Cambodians learn what happened and why; and if it can demonstrate to the world that justice, however delayed, awaits those in power who commit heinous crimes against humanity.

The court — as well as other international tribunals — should be supported by serious efforts to ensure that such atrocities do not happen again. Getting a U.N. force into Darfur would be a good start.

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