



GENOCIDE WATCH

THE INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END GENOCIDE

Ex-Khmer Rouge Leader Blames U.S.
By Seth Mydans, The New York Times
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PHNOM PENH — A Khmer Rouge leader told a court Wednesday that a secret campaign of U.S. bombing during the Vietnam War had contributed to the rise of the radical Communist movement that ravaged Cambodia three decades ago in one of the bloodiest episodes of mass killing in the last century.



Mark Peters/ECCC, via Reuters

Khieu Samphan, a Khmer Rouge leader, attended his trial at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia on the outskirts of Phnom Penh on Wednesday.

The leader, Khieu Samphan, 80, the regime's head of state, also challenged the court to put former King Norodom Sihanouk on trial with him because the former king had previously held what Mr. Khieu Samphan called the same powerless titular position with the Khmer Rouge.

Mr. Khieu Samphan is one of three Khmer Rouge leaders charged in a U.N.-backed tribunal with genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity that resulted in the deaths of 1.7 million people when they held power between 1975 and 1979.

"You seem to forget that between January 1970 and August 1973 — that is, the period of two and a half years — the United States carpeted the small Kampuchean territory with bombs" in a campaign aimed at cutting off North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam.

Kampuchea is the name used by the Khmer Rouge for Cambodia.

The bombing, together with a U.S.-backed coup that ousted then-Prince Sihanouk as head of state, inspired many Cambodians to join the Communist resistance, often responding to a call to arms by the prince.

"Could you imagine what my country faced after such a bloody killing and war?" asked Mr. Khieu Samphan. "Can you imagine what the situation was like for the Cambodian people and the country as a whole during such carpet bombings?"

A second defendant, Ieng Sary, 86, the former foreign minister, spoke only briefly on Wednesday, challenging the jurisdiction of the court and noting that he had received a royal pardon and amnesty when he surrendered from the Khmer Rouge guerrilla movement in 1996. The court has ruled that that amnesty does not apply to its proceedings.

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"I'm very exhausted," said Mr. Ieng Sary, who has a variety of medical problems and was wheeled to the witness stand in a wheelchair.

"I perhaps cannot continue reading because my heart will not allow me to continue reading," he said, putting a hand on his chest under his zippered jacket and sighing.

Like Mr. Khieu Samphan, the third defendant, Nuon Chea, 85, also sought to put the Khmer Rouge period into historical context when he spoke on Tuesday by saying it had been part of a struggle against Vietnamese ambitions to annex Cambodia and exterminate its people.

On Wednesday, one of Mr. Nuon Chea's lawyers, Michiel Pestman, issued a statement saying that Henry Kissinger, the former U.S. secretary of state, should also be put on trial for war crimes as "possibly the main architect of the bombing campaign in Cambodia."

"Most historians agree that without this American intervention the Khmer Rouge would not have been able to seize power," Mr. Pestman said. "Without Kissinger we would not be here today."

The references to U.S. culpability are clearly aimed at the public and the historical record, since the charges in this case are strictly limited to the Khmer Rouge period in power from 1975 to 1979.

In the tribunal's first case, Kaing Guek Eav, or Duch, the commandant of the main Khmer Rouge prison, Tuol Sleng, was sentenced in July 2010 to 35 years, commuted to 19 years.

Mr. Khieu Samphan, who before going underground was a teacher and legislator known for riding his bicycle to Parliament in a gesture of frugality, spoke forcefully about his ideals and his innocence, gripping his typed remarks with both hands and holding them up at eye level.

"I continue to hope that this trial will at least give me an opportunity to explain to the Cambodian public how it was possible for me to have occupied an official senior position in Democratic Kampuchea without having been a part of the decision-making process and without having been informed of all that was happening in our country," he said.

"Why is there no document confirming that I was an official member of the Standing Committee?" he asked, denying that he was part of the decision-making group in which membership would be evidence of guilt.

"You would have the public believe that everyone is lumped together in the same bag," he said. "But it's a lie. A manipulation. In fact you know very well that Democratic Kampuchea was very structured, compartmentalized and had a penchant for secrecy."

Multimedia

Rebutting the prosecutors' contention that he must have known about atrocities because he had often traveled through the country, Mr. Khieu Samphan said, "Do you really think that when I visited these work sites, alone or accompanied by the king, workers were being murdered in front of us with hoes or bullets in the back of the neck?"

He disparaged the prosecutors' claim that party leaders were responsible for an abusive policy of forced marriage, in which reluctant couples were sometimes spied on to confirm that they had consummated their union.

"Of course I wasn't a member of the 'angkar,'" he said, using the word applied to the shadowy Khmer Rouge leadership, and then, looking out from behind his sheaf of papers, "but I imagine that with a country to run, that its members had other things to do than to check if people were having sex."

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He called the prosecutors “monumentally biased” and said he was in the courtroom to set the record straight. The defendants will be given several opportunities to address the court again as it explores various aspects of the charges.

“I believe that the more procedures at the court evolve, the more the monks and the public will see and understand and judge the issues for themselves,” he said.

As in previous sessions, the courtroom was packed with villagers who had been bused from the provinces and with groups of white-shirted students.

One of the students, Dany Sang, 22, a teacher trainee, said: “I don’t know about the past, but I just listen. I don’t have the confidence to make a decision. I will discuss it with my teachers or my parents because they know about the things in the past. Now, I’m not clear.”

He said that he was convinced that the defendants wanted to help their country but that he did not believe Mr. Khieu Samphan’s assertion that he was ignorant of the killings.

“The Khmer Rouge were not good,” he said. “They killed a lot of people. A lot of people hate them so much. Me, too. They killed our relatives, our nation. I really hate them.”

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